Complete

Clive Barker's

Books of Blood

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By

Clive Barker

"Everybody is a book of blood; wherever we're opened, we're red."

I: THE BOOK OF BLOOD

The dead have highways.

They run, unerring lines of ghost-trains, of dream-carriages, across the wasteland behind our lives, bearing an endless traffic of departed souls. Their thrum and throb can be heard in the broken places of the world, through cracks made by acts of cruelty, violence and depravity. Their freight, the wandering dead, can be glimpsed when the heart is close to bursting, and sights that should be hidden come plainly into view.

They have sign-posts, these highways, and bridges and lay-bys. They have turnpikes and intersections. It is at these intersections, where the crowds of dead mingle and cross, that this forbidden highway is most likely to spill through into our world. The traffic is heavy at the cross-roads, and the voices of the dead are at their most shrill. Here the barriers that separate one reality from the next are worn thin with the passage of innumerable feet. Such an intersection on the highway of the dead was located at Number 65, Tollington Place. Just a brick-fronted, mock-Georgian detached house, Number 65 was unremarkable in every other way. An old, forgettable house, stripped of the cheap grandeur it had once laid claim to, it had stood empty for a decade or more. It was not rising damp that drove tenants from Number 65. It was not the rot in the cellars, or the subsidence that had opened a crack in the front of the house that ran from doorstep to eaves, it was the noise of passage. In the upper storey the din of that traffic never ceased. It cracked the plaster on the walls and it warped the beams. It rattled the windows. It rattled the mind too. Number 65, Tollington Place was a haunted house, and no-one could possess it for long without insanity setting in.

At some time in its history a horror had been committed in that house. No-one knew when, or what. But even to the untrained observer the oppressive atmosphere of the house, particularly the top storey, was unmistakable. There was a memory and a promise of blood in the air of Number 65, a scent that lingered in the sinuses, and turned the strongest stomach. The building and its environs were shunned by vermin, by birds, even by flies. No woodlice crawled in its kitchen, no starling had nested in its attic. Whatever violence had been done there, it had opened the house up, as surely as a knife slits a fish's belly; and through that cut, that wound in the world, the dead peered out, and had their say.

That was the rumour anyway. It was the third week of the investigation at 65, Tollington Place. Three weeks of unprecedented success in the realm of the paranormal. Using a newcomer to the business, a twenty-year-old called Simon McNeal, as a medium, the Essex University Parapsychology Unit had recorded all but incontrovertible evidence of life after death.

In the top room of the house, a claustrophobic corridor of a room, the McNeal boy had apparently summoned the dead, and at his request they had left copious evidence of their visits, writing in a hundred different hands on the pale ochre walls. They wrote, it seemed, whatever came into their heads. Their names, of course, and their birth and death dates. Fragments of memories, and well-wishes to their living descendants, strange elliptical phrases that hinted at their present torments and mourned their lost joys. Some of the hands were square and ugly, some delicate and feminine. There were obscene drawings and half-finished jokes alongside lines of romantic poetry. A badly drawn rose. A game of noughts and crosses. A shopping list.

The famous had come to this wailing wall – Mussolini was there, Lennon and Janis Joplin – and nobodies too, forgotten people, had signed themselves beside the greats. It was a roll-call of the dead, and it was growing day by day, as though word of mouth was spreading amongst the lost tribes, and seducing them out of silence to sign this barren room with their sacred presence.

After a lifetime's work in the field of psychic research, Doctor Florescu was well accustomed to the hard facts of failure. It had been almost comfortable, settling back into a certainty that the evidence would never manifest itself. Now, faced with a sudden and spectacular success, she felt both elated and confused.

She sat, as she had sat for three incredible weeks, in the main room on the middle floor, one flight of stairs down from the writing room, and listened to the clamour of noises from upstairs with a sort of awe, scarcely daring to believe that she was allowed to be present at this miracle. There had been nibbles before, tantalizing hints of voices from another world, but this was the first time that province had insisted on being heard.

Upstairs, the noises stopped.

Mary looked at her watch: it was six-seventeen p.m.

For some reason best known to the visitors, the contact never lasted much after six. She'd wait 'til half-past then go up. What would it have been today? Who would have come to that sordid little room, and left their mark? "Shall I set up the cameras?" Reg Fuller, her assistant, asked.

"Please," she murmured, distracted by expectation.

"Wonder what we'll get today?"

"We'll leave him ten minutes."

"Sure."

Upstairs, McNeal slumped in the corner of the room, and watched the October sun through the tiny window. He felt a little shut in, all alone in that damn place, but he still smiled to himself, that warm, beatific smile that melted even the most academic heart. Especially Doctor Florescu's: oh yes, the woman was infatuated with his smile, his eyes, the lost look he put on for her.

It was a fine game.

Indeed, at first that was all it had been – a game. Now Simon knew they were playing for bigger stakes; what had begun as a sort of lie-detection test had turned into a very serious contest: McNeal versus the Truth. The truth was simple: he was a cheat. He penned all his 'ghost-writings' on the wall with tiny shards of lead he secreted under his tongue: he banged and thrashed and shouted without any provocation other than the sheer mischief of it: and the unknown names he wrote, ha, he laughed to think of it, the names he found in telephone directories. Yes, it was indeed a fine game.

She promised him so much, she tempted him with fame, encouraging every lie that he invented. Promises of wealth, of applauded appearances on the television, of an adulation he'd never known before. As long as he produced the ghosts.

He smiled the smile again. She called him her Go-Between: an innocent carrier of messages. She'd be up the stairs soon – her eyes on his body, his voice close to tears with her pathetic excitement at another series of scrawled names and nonsense.

He liked it when she looked at his nakedness, or all but nakedness. All his sessions were carried out with him only dressed in a pair of briefs, to preclude any hidden aids. A ridiculous precaution. All he

needed were the leads under his tongue, and enough energy to fling himself around for half an hour, bellowing his head off. He was sweating. The groove of his breast-bone was slick with it, his hair plastered to his pale forehead. Today had been hard work: he was looking forward to getting out of the room, sluicing himself down, and basking in admiration awhile. The Go-Between put his hand down his briefs and played with himself, idly. Somewhere in the room a fly, or flies maybe, were trapped. It was late in the season for flies, but he could hear them somewhere close. They buzzed and fretted against the window, or around the light bulb. He heard their tiny fly voices, but didn't question them, too engrossed in his thoughts of the game, and in the simple delight of stroking himself. How they buzzed, these harmless insect voices, buzzed and sang and complained. How they complained. Mary Florescu drummed the table with her fingers. Her wedding ring was loose today, she felt it moving with the rhythm of her tapping. Sometimes it was tight and sometimes loose: one of those small mysteries that she'd never analysed properly but simply accepted. In fact today it was very loose: almost ready to fall off. She thought of Alan's face. Alan's dear face. She thought of it through a hole made of her wedding ring, as if down a tunnel. Was that what his death had been like: being carried away and yet further away down a tunnel to the dark? She thrust the ring deeper on to her hand. Through the tips of her index-finger and thumb she seemed almost to taste the sour metal as she touched it. It was a curious sensation, an illusion of some kind.

To wash the bitterness away she thought of the boy. His face came easily, so very easily, splashing into her consciousness with his smile and his unremarkable physique, still unmanly. Like a girl really – the roundness of him, the sweet clarity of his skin – the innocence.

Her fingers were still on the ring, and the sourness she had tasted grew. She looked up. Fuller was organizing the equipment. Around his balding head a nimbus of pale green light shimmered and wove -She suddenly felt giddy. Fuller saw nothing and heard nothing. His head was bowed to his business, engrossed. Mary stared at him still, seeing the halo on him, feeling new sensations waking in her, coursing through her. The air seemed suddenly alive: the very molecules of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen jostled against her in an intimate embrace. The nimbus around Fuller's head was spreading, finding fellow radiance in every object in the room. The unnatural sense in her fingertips was spreading too. She could see the colour of her breath as she exhaled it: a pinky orange glamour in the bubbling air. She could hear, quite clearly, the voice of the desk she sat at: the low whine of its solid presence. The world was opening up: throwing her

senses into an ecstasy, coaxing them into a wild confusion of functions. She was capable, suddenly, of knowing the world as a system, not of politics or religions, but as a system of senses, a system that spread out from the living flesh to the inert wood of her desk, to the stale gold of her wedding ring. And further. Beyond wood, beyond gold. The crack opened that led to the highway. In her head she heard voices that came from no living mouth.

She looked up, or rather some force thrust her head back violently and she found herself staring up at the ceiling. It was covered with worms. No, that was absurd! It seemed to be alive, though, maggoty with life – pulsing, dancing. She could see the boy through the ceiling. He was sitting on the floor, with his jutting member in his hand. His head was thrown back, like hers. He was as lost in his ecstasy as she was. Her new sight saw the throbbing light in and around his body – traced the passion that was seated in his gut, and his head molten with pleasure. It saw another sight, the lie in him, the absence of power where she'd thought there had been something wonderful. He had no talent to commune with ghosts, nor had ever had, she saw this plainly. He was a little liar, a boy-liar, a sweet, white boy-liar without the compassion or the wisdom to understand what he had dared to do. Now it was done. The lies were told, the tricks were played, and the people on the highway, sick beyond death of being misrepresented and mocked, were buzzing at the crack in the wall, and demanding satisfaction. That crack she had opened: she had unknowingly fingered and fumbled at, unlocking it by slow degrees. Her desire for the boy had done that: her endless thoughts of him, her frustration, her heat and her disgust at her heat had pulled the crack wider. Of all the powers that made the system manifest, love, and its companion, passion, and their companion, loss, were the most potent. Here she was, an embodiment of all three. Loving, and wanting, and sensing acutely the impossibility of the former two. Wrapped up in an agony of feeling which she had denied herself, believing she loved the boy simply as her Go-Between.

It wasn't true! It wasn't true! She wanted him, wanted him now, deep inside her. Except that now it was too late.

The traffic could be denied no longer: it demanded, yes, it demanded access to the little trickster. She was helpless to prevent it. All she could do was utter a tiny gasp of horror as she saw the highway open out before her, and understood that this was no common intersection they stood at.

Fuller heard the sound.

"Doctor?" He looked up from his tinkering and his face – washed with a blue light she could see from the corner of her eye – bore an expression of enquiry.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

She thought, with a fillip of her stomach, of how this was bound to end.

The ether-faces of the dead were quite clear in front of her. She could see the profundity of their suffering and she could sympathize with their ache to be heard.

She saw plainly that the highways that crossed at Tollington Place were not common thoroughfares. She was not staring at the happy, idling traffic of the ordinary dead. No, that house opened onto a route walked only by the victims and the perpetrators of violence. The men, the women, the children who had died enduring all the pains nerves had wit to muster, with their minds branded by the circumstances of their deaths. Eloquent beyond words, their eyes spoke their agonies, their ghost bodies still bearing the wounds that had killed them. She could also see, mingling freely with the innocents, their slaughterers and tormentors. These monsters, frenzied, mush-minded bloodletters, peeked through into the world: nonesuch creatures, unspoken, forbidden miracles of our species, chattering and howling their Jabberwocky.

Now the boy above her sensed them. She saw him turn a little in the silent room, knowing that the voices he heard were not fly-voices; the complaints were not insect-complaints. He was aware, suddenly, that he had lived in a tiny corner of the world, and that the rest of it, the Third, Fourth and Fifth Worlds, were pressing at his lying back, hungry and irrevocable. The sight of his panic was also a smell and a taste to her. Yes, she tasted him as she had always longed to, but it was not a kiss that married their senses, it was his growing panic. It filled her up: her empathy was total. The fearful glance was hers as much as his – their dry throats rasped the same small word: "Please -”

That the child learns. "Please” – That wins care and gifts.

"Please -”

That even the dead, surely, even the dead must know and obey.

"Please -”

Today there would be no such mercy given, she knew for certain. These ghosts had despaired on the highway a grieving age, bearing the wounds they had died with, and the insanities they had slaughtered with. They had endured his levity and insolence, his idiocies, the fabrications that had made a game of their ordeals. They wanted to speak the truth.

Fuller was peering at her more closely, his face now swimming in a sea of pulsing orange light. She felt his hands on her skin. They tasted of vinegar.

"Are you all right?" he said, his breath like iron.

She shook her head.

No, she was not all right, nothing was right.

The crack was gaping wider every second: through it she could see another sky, the slate heavens that lured over the highway. It overwhelmed the mere reality of the house.

"Please," she said, her eyes rolling up to the fading substance of the ceiling.

Wider. Wider -The brittle world she inhabited was stretched to breaking point.

Suddenly, it broke, like a dam, and the black waters poured through, inundating the room.

Fuller knew something was amiss (it was in the colour of his aura, the sudden fear), but he didn't understand what was happening. She felt his spine ripple: she could see his brain whirl.

"What's going on?" he said. The pathos of the enquiry made her want to laugh.

Upstairs, the water-jug in the writing room shattered.

Fuller let her go and ran towards the door. It began to rattle and shake even as he approached it, as though all the inhabitants of hell were beating on the other side. The handle turned and turned and turned. The paint blistered. The key glowed red-hot.

Fuller looked back at the Doctor, who was still fixed in that grotesque position, head back, eyes wide. He reached for the handle,

but the door opened before he could touch it. The hallway beyond had disappeared altogether. Where the familiar interior had stood the vista of the highway stretched to the horizon. The sight killed Fuller in a moment. His mind had no strength to take the panorama in – it could not control the overload that ran through his every nerve. His heart stopped; a revolution overturned the order of his system; his bladder failed, his bowels failed, his limbs shook and collapsed. As he sank to the floor his face began to blister like the door, and his corpse rattle like the handle. He was inert stuff already: as fit for this indignity as wood or steel. Somewhere to the East his soul joined the wounded highway, on its route to the intersection where a moment previously he had died.

Mary Florescu knew she was alone. Above her the marvelous boy, her beautiful, cheating child, was writhing and screeching as the dead set their vengeful hands on his fresh skin. She knew their intention: she could see it in their eyes – there was nothing new about it. Every history had this particular torment in its tradition. He was to be used to record their testaments. He was to be their page, their book, the vessel for their autobiographies. A book of blood. A book made of blood. A book written in blood. She thought of the grimoires that had been made of dead human skin: she'd seen them, touched them. She thought of the tattoos she'd seen: freak show exhibits some of them, others just shirtless labourers in the Street with a message to their mothers pricked across their backs. It was not unknown, to write a book of blood.

But on such skin, on such gleaming skin – oh God, that was the crime. He screamed as the torturing needles of broken jug-glass skipped against his flesh, ploughing it up. She felt his agonies as if they had been hers, and they were not so terrible.

Yet he screamed. And fought, and poured obscenities out at his attackers. They took no notice. They swarmed around him, deaf to any plea or prayer, and worked on him with all the enthusiasm of creatures forced into silence for too long. Mary listened as his voice wearied with its complaints, and she fought against the weight of fear in her limbs. Somehow, she felt, she must get up to the room. It didn't matter what was beyond the door or on the stairs -he needed her, and that was enough.

She stood up and felt her hair swirl up from her head, flailing like the snake hair of the Gorgon Medusa. Reality swam – there was scarcely a floor to be seen beneath her. The boards of the house were ghost-wood, and beyond them a seething dark raged and yawned at

her. She looked to the door, feeling all the time a lethargy that was so hard to fight off.

Clearly they didn't want her up there. Maybe, she thought, they even fear me a little. The idea gave her resolution; why else were they bothering to intimidate her unless her very presence, having once opened this hole in the world, was now a threat to them?

The blistered door was open. Beyond it the reality of the house had succumbed completely to the howling chaos of the highway. She stepped through, concentrating on the way her feet still touched solid floor even though her eyes could no longer see it. The sky above her was prussian-blue, the highway was wide and windy, the dead pressed on every side. She fought through them as through a crowd of living people, while their gawping, idiot faces looked at her and hated her invasion.

The 'please' was gone. Now she said nothing; just gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes against the highway, kicking her feet forward to find the reality of the stairs that she knew were there. She tripped as she touched them, and a howl went up from the crowd. She couldn't tell if they were laughing at her clumsiness, or sounding a warning at how far she had got.

First step. Second step. Third step.

Though she was torn at from every side, she was winning against the crowd. Ahead she could see through the door of the room to where her little liar was sprawled, surrounded by his attackers. His briefs were around his ankles: the scene looked like a kind of rape. He screamed no longer, but his eyes were wild with terror and pain. At least he was still alive. The natural resilience of his young mind had half accepted the spectacle that had opened in front of him. Suddenly his head jerked around and he looked straight through the door at her. In this extremity he had dredged up a true talent, a skill that was a fraction of Mary's, but enough to make contact with her. Their eyes met. In a sea of blue darkness, surrounded on every side with a civilization they neither knew nor understood, their living hearts met and married.

"I'm sorry," he said silently. It was infinitely pitiful. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He looked away, his gaze wrenched from hers.

She was certain she must be almost at the top of the stairs, her feet still treading air as far as her eyes could tell, the faces of the travelers

above, below and on every side of her. But she could see, very faintly, the outline of the door, and the boards and beams of the room where Simon lay. He was one mass of blood now, from head to foot. She could see the marks, the hieroglyphics of agony on every inch of his torso, his face, his limbs. One moment he seemed to flash into a kind of focus, and she could see him in the empty room, with the sun through the window, and the shattered jug at his side. Then her concentration would falter and instead she'd see the invisible world made visible, and he'd be hanging in the air while they wrote on him from every side, plucking out the hair on his head and body to clear the page, writing in his armpits, writing on his eyelids, writing on his genitals, in the crease of his buttocks, on the soles of his feet.

Only the wounds were in common between the two sights. Whether she saw him beset with authors, or alone in the room, he was bleeding and bleeding.

She had reached the door now. Her trembling hand stretched to touch the solid reality of the handle, but even with all the concentration she could muster it would not come clear. There was barely a ghost-image for her to focus on, though it was sufficient. She grasped the handle, turned it, and flung the door of the writing room open. He was there, in front of her. No more than two or three yards of possessed air separated them. Their eyes met again, and an eloquent look, common to the living and the dead worlds, passed between them. There was compassion in that look, and love. The fictions fell away, the lies were dust. In place of the boy's manipulative smiles was a true sweetness – answered in her face.

And the dead, fearful of this look, turned their heads away. Their faces tightened, as though the skin was being stretched over the bone, their flesh darkening to a bruise, their voices becoming wistful with the anticipation of defeat. She reached to touch him, no longer having to fight against the hordes of the dead; they were falling away from their quarry on every side, like dying flies dropping from a window.

She touched him, lightly, on the face. The touch was a benediction. Tears filled his eyes, and ran down his scarified cheek, mingling with the blood.

The dead had no voices now, nor even mouths. They were lost along the highway, their malice dammed. Plane by plane the room began to re-establish itself. The floor-boards became visible under his sobbing body, every nail, every stained plank. The windows came clearly into view – and outside the twilight street was echoing with

the clamour of children. The highway had disappeared from living human sight entirely. Its travelers had turned their faces to the dark and gone away into oblivion, leaving only their signs and their talismans in the concrete world. On the middle landing of Number 65 the smoking, blistered body of Reg Fuller was casually trodden by the travelers' feet as they passed over the intersection. At length Fuller's own soul came by in the throng and glanced down at the flesh he had once occupied, before the crowd pressed him on towards his judgement. Upstairs, in the darkening room, Mary Florescu knelt beside the McNeal boy and stroked his blood-plastered head. She didn't want to leave the house for assistance until she was certain his tormentors would not come back.

There was no sound now but the whine of a jet finding its way through the stratosphere to morning. Even the boy's breathing was hushed and regular. No nimbus of light surrounded him. Every sense was in place. Sight. Sound. Touch.

Touch.

She touched him now as she had never previously dared, brushing her fingertips, oh so lightly, over his body, running her fingers across the raised skin like a blind woman reading braille. There were minute words on every millimeter of his body, written in a multitude of hands. Even through the blood she could discern the meticulous way that the words had harrowed into him. She could even read, by the dimming light, an occasional phrase. It was proof beyond any doubt, and she wished, oh God how she wished, that she had not come by it. And yet, after a lifetime of waiting, here it was: the revelation of life beyond flesh, written in flesh itself.

The boy would survive, that was clear. Already the blood was drying, and the myriad wounds healing. He was healthy and strong, after all: there would be no fundamental physical damage. His beauty was gone forever, of course. From now on he would be an object of curiosity at best, and at worst of repugnance and horror. But she would protect him, and he would learn, in time, how to know and trust her. Their hearts were inextricably tied together.

And after a time, when the words on his body were scabs and scars, she would read him. She would trace, with infinite love and patience, the stories the dead had told on him.

The tale on his abdomen, written in a fine, cursive style. The testimony in exquisite, elegant print that covered his face and scalp.

The story on his back, and on his shin, on his hands.

She would read them all, report them all, every last syllable that glistened and seeped beneath her adoring fingers, so that the world would know the stories that the dead tell.

He was a Book of Blood, and she his sole translator.

As darkness fell, she left off her vigil and led him, naked, into the balmy night.

Here then are the stories written on the Book of Blood. Read, if it pleases you, and learn.

They are a map of that dark highway that leads out of life towards unknown destinations. Few will have to take it.

Most will go peacefully along lamplit streets, ushered out of living with prayers and caresses. But for a few, a chosen few, the horrors will come, skipping to fetch them off to the highway of the damned.

So read. Read and learn.

It's best to be prepared for the worst, after all, and wise to learn to walk before breath runs out.

II: THE MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN

Leon Kaufman was no longer new to the city. The Palace of Delights, he'd always called it, in the days of his innocence. But that was when he lived Atlanta, and New York still a kind promised land, where anything everything possible.

Now Kaufman had lived three and a half months in his dream-city, and the Palace of Delights seemed less than delightful.

Was it really only a season since he stepped out of Port Authority Bus Station and looked up 42nd Street towards the Broadway intersection? So short a time to lose so many treasured illusions.

He was embarrassed now even to think of his naivety. It made him wince to remember how he had stood and announced aloud: "New York, I love you."

Love? Never.

It had been at best an infatuation.

And now, after only three months living with his object of adoration, spending his days and nights in her presence, she had lost her aura of perfection. New York was just a city.

He had seen her wake in the morning like a slut, and pick murdered men from between her teeth, and suicides from the tangles of her hair. He had seen her late at night, her dirty back streets shamelessly courting depravity. He had watched her in the hot afternoon, sluggish and ugly, indifferent to the atrocities that were being committed every hour in her throttled passages.

It was no Palace of Delights.

It bred death, not pleasure.

Everyone he met had brushed with violence; it was a fact of life. It was almost chic to have known someone who had died a violent death. It was proof of living in that city.

But Kaufman had loved New York from afar for almost twenty years. He'd planned his love affair for most of his adult life. It was not easy, therefore, to shake the passion off, as though he had never felt it. There were still times, very early, before the cop-sirens began, or at

twilight, when Manhattan was still a miracle.

For those moments, and for the sake of his dreams, he still gave her the benefit of the doubt, even when her behavior was less than ladylike.

She didn't make such forgiveness easy. In the few months that Kaufman had lived in New York her streets had been awash with spilt blood.

In fact, it was not so much the streets themselves, but the tunnels beneath those streets.

"Subway Slaughter' was the catch-phrase of the month. Only the previous week another three killings had been reported. The bodies had been discovered in one of the subway cars on the AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, hacked open and partially disemboweled, as though an efficient abattoir operative had been interrupted in his work. The killings were so thoroughly professional that the police were interviewing every man on their records who had some past connection with the butchery trade. The meat-packaging plants on the water-front were being watched, the slaughter-houses scoured for clues. A swift arrest was promised, though none was made.

This recent trio of corpses was not the first to be discovered in such a state; the very day that Kaufman had arrived a story had broken in The Times that was still the talk of every morbid secretary in the office.

The story went that a German visitor, lost in the subway system late at night, had come across a body in a train. The victim was a well-built, attractive thirty-year-old woman from Brooklyn. She had been completely stripped. Every shred of clothing, every article of jewellery. Even the studs in her ears.

More bizarre than the stripping was the neat and systematic way in which the clothes had been folded and placed in individual plastic bags on the seat beside the corpse.

This was no irrational slasher at work. This was a highly-organized mind: a lunatic with a strong sense of tidiness. Further, and yet more bizarre than the careful stripping of the corpse, was the outrage that had then been perpetrated upon it. The reports claimed, though the Police Department failed to confirm this, that the body had been meticulously shaved. Every hair had been removed: from the head, from the groin, from beneath the arms; all cut and scorched back to

the flesh. Even the eyebrows and eyelashes had been plucked out.

Finally, this all too naked slab had been hung by the feet from one of the holding handles set in the roof of the car, and a black plastic bucket, lined with a black plastic bag, had been placed beneath the corpse to catch the steady fall of blood from its wounds.

In that state, stripped, shaved, suspended and practically bled white, the body of Loretta Dyer had been found. It was disgusting, it was meticulous, and it was deeply confusing.

There had been no rape, nor any sign of torture. The woman had been swiftly and efficiently dispatched as though she was a piece of meat. And the butcher was still loose.

The City Fathers, in their wisdom, declared a complete close-down on press reports of the slaughter. It was said that the man who had found the body was in protective custody in New Jersey, out of sight of enquiring journalists. But the cover-up had failed. Some greedy cop had leaked the salient details to a reporter from The Times. Everyone in New York now knew the horrible story of the slaughters. It was a topic of conversation in every Deli and bar; and, of course, on the subway.

But Loretta Dyer was only the first.

Now three more bodies had been found in identical circumstances; though the work had clearly been interrupted on this occasion. Not all the bodies had been shaved, and the jugulars had not been severed to bleed them. There was another, more significant difference in the discovery: it was not a tourist who had stumbled on the sight, it was a reporter from The New York Times.

Kaufman surveyed the report that sprawled across the front page of the newspaper. He had no prurient interest in the story, unlike his elbow mate along the counter of the Deli. All he felt was a mild disgust, that made him push his plate of over-cooked eggs aside. It was simply further proof of his city's decadence. He could take no pleasure in her sickness.

Nevertheless, being human, he could not entirely ignore the gory details on the page in front of him. The article was unsensationally written, but the simple clarity of the style made the subject seem more appalling. He couldn't help wondering, too, about the man behind the atrocities. Was there one psychotic loose, or several, each inspired to copy the original murder? Perhaps this was only the beginning of the

horror. Maybe more murders would follow, until at last the murderer, in his exhilaration or exhaustion, would step beyond caution and be taken. Until then the city, Kaufman's adored city, would live in a state somewhere between hysteria and ecstasy.

At his elbow a bearded man knocked over Kaufman's coffee.

"Shit!" he said.

Kaufman shifted on his stool to avoid the dribble of coffee running off the counter.

"Shit," the man said again.

No harm done," said Kaufman.

He looked at the man with a slightly disdainful expression on his face. The clumsy bastard was attempting to soak up the coffee with a napkin, which was turning to mush as he did so.

Kaufman found himself wondering if this oaf, with his florid cheeks and his uncultivated beard, was capable of murder. Was there any sign on that over-fed face, any clue in the shape of his head or the turn of his small eyes that gave his true nature away?

The man spoke.

"Wannanother?"

Kaufman shook his head.

"Coffee. Regular. Dark," the oaf said to the girl behind the counter. She looked up from cleaning the grill of cold fat. "Huh?"

"Coffee. You deaf?"

The man grinned at Kaufman.

"Deaf," he said.

Kaufman noticed he had three teeth missing from his lower jaw.

"Looks bad, huh?" he said.

What did he mean? The coffee? The absence of his teeth?

"Three people like that. Carved up." Kaufman nodded.

"Makes you think," he said. "Sure."

"I mean, it's a cover-up isn't it? They know who did it."

This conversation's ridiculous, thought Kaufman. He took off his spectacles and pocketed them: the bearded face was no longer in focus. That was some improvement at least.

"Bastards," he said. "Fucking bastards, all of them. I'll lay you anything it's a cover-up."

"Of what?"

"They got the evidence: they're just keeping us in the fucking dark. There's something out there that's not human." Kaufman understood. It was a conspiracy theory the oaf was trotting out. He'd heard them so often; a panacea. "See, they do all this cloning stuff and it gets out of hand.

They could be growing fucking monsters for all we know.

There's something down there they won't tell us about.

Cover-up, like I say. Lay you anything." Kaufman found the man's certainty attractive. Monsters, on the prowl. Six heads: a dozen eyes. Why not?

He knew why not. Because that excused his city: that let her off the hook. And Kaufman believed in his heart that the monsters to be found in the tunnels were perfectly human.

The bearded man threw his money on the counter and got up, sliding his fat bottom off the stained plastic stool. "Probably a fucking cop," he said, as his parting shot. "Tried to make a fucking hero, made a fucking monster instead." He grinned grotesquely. "Lay you anything," he continued and lumbered out without another word. Kaufman slowly exhaled through his nose, feeling the tension in his body abate.

He hated that sort of confrontation: it made him feel tongue-tied and ineffectual. Come to think of it, he hated that kind of man: the opinionated brute that New York bred so well.

It was coming up to six when Mahogany woke. The morning rain had turned into a light drizzle by twilight. The air was about as clear-smelling as it ever got in Manhattan. He stretched on his bed, threw

off the dirty blanket and got up for work.

In the bathroom the rain was dripping on the box of the air-conditioner, filling the apartment with a rhythmical slapping sound. Mahogany turned on the television to cover the noise, uninterested in anything it had to offer. He went to the window. The street six floors below was thick with traffic and people.

After a hard day's work New York was on its way home: to play, to make love. People were streaming out of their offices and into their automobiles. Some would be testy after a day's sweaty labour in a badly-aired office; others, benign as sheep, would be wandering home down the Avenues, ushered along by a ceaseless current of bodies. Still others would even now be cramming on to the subway, blind to the graffiti on every wall, deaf to the babble of their own voices, and to the cold thunder of the tunnels.

It pleased Mahogany to think of that. He was, after all, not one of the common herd. He could stand at his window and look down on a thousand heads below him, and know he was a chosen man.

He had deadlines to meet, of course, like the people in the street. But his work was not their senseless labour, it was more like a sacred duty.

He needed to live, and sleep, and shit like them, too. But it was not financial necessity that drove him, but the demands of history.

He was in a great tradition, that stretched further back than America. He was a night-stalker: like Jack the Ripper, like Gilles de Rais, a living embodiment of death, a wraith with a human face. He was a haunter of sleep, and an awakener of terrors.

The people below him could not know his face; nor would care to look twice at him. But his stare caught them, and weighed them up, selecting only the ripest from the passing parade, choosing only the healthy and the young to fall under his sanctified knife.

Sometimes Mahogany longed to announce his identity to the world, but he had responsibilities and they bore on him heavily. He couldn't expect fame. His was a secret life, and it was merely pride that longed for recognition. After all, he thought, does the beef salute the butcher as it throbs to its knees?

All in all, he was content. To be part of that great tradition was enough, would always have to remain enough. Recently, however,

there had been discoveries. They weren't his fault of course. Nobody could possibly blame him. But it was a bad time. Life was not as easy as it had been ten years ago. He was that much older, of course, and that made the job more exhausting; and more and more the obligations weighed on his shoulders. He was a chosen man, and that was a difficult privilege to live with.

He wondered, now and then, if it wasn't time to think about training a younger man for his duties. There would need to be consultations with the Fathers, but sooner or later a replacement would have to be found, and it would be, he felt, a criminal waste of his experience not to take on an apprentice.

There were so many felicities he could pass on. The tricks of his extraordinary trade. The best way to stalk, to cut, to strip, to bleed. The best meat for the purpose. The simplest way to dispose of the remains. So much detail, so much accumulated expertise.

Mahogany wandered into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As he stepped in he looked down at his body. The small paunch, the greying hairs on his sagging chest, the scars, and pimples that littered his pale skin. He was getting old. Still, tonight, like every other night, he had a job to do.

Kaufman hurried back into the lobby with his sandwich, turning down his collar and brushing rain off his hair. The clock above the elevator read seven-sixteen. He would work through until ten, no later.

The elevator took him up to the twelfth floor and to the Pappas offices. He traipsed unhappily through the maze of empty desks and hooded machines to his little territory, which was still illuminated. The women who cleaned the offices were chatting down the corridor: otherwise the place was lifeless.

He took off his coat, shook the rain off it as best he could, and hung it up.

Then he sat down in front of the piles of orders he had been tussling with for the best part of three days, and began work. It would only take one more night's labour, he felt sure, to break the back of the job, and he found it easier to concentrate without the incessant clatter of typists and typewriters on every side.

He unwrapped his ham on whole-wheat with extra mayonnaise and settled in for the evening.

It was nine now.

Mahogany was dressed for the nightshift. He had his usual sober suit on, with his brown tie neatly knotted, his silver cufflinks (a gift from his first wife) placed in the sleeves of his immaculately pressed shirt, his thinning hair gleaming with oil, his nails snipped and polished, his face flushed with cologne.

His bag was packed. The towels, the instruments, his chain-mail apron.

He checked his appearance in the mirror. He could, he thought, still be taken for a man of forty-five, fifty at the outside.

As he surveyed his face he reminded himself of his duty. Above all, he must be careful. There would be eyes on him every step of the way, watching his performance tonight, and judging it. He must walk out like an innocent, arousing no suspicion.

If they only knew, he thought. The people who walked, ran and skipped past him on the streets: who collided with him without apology: who met his gaze with contempt: who smiled at his bulk, looking uneasy in his ill-fitting suit. If only they knew what he did, what he was and what he carried.

Caution, he said to himself, and turned off the light. The apartment was dark. He went to the door and opened it, used to walking in blackness. Happy in it.

The rain clouds had cleared entirely. Mahogany made his way down Amsterdam towards the Subway at 145th Street. Tonight he'd take the AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS again, his favourite line, and often the most productive.

Down the Subway steps, token in hand. Through the automatic gates. The smell of the tunnels was in his nostrils now. Not the smell of the deep tunnels of course. They had a scent all of their own. But there was reassurance even in the stale electric air of this shallow line. The regurgitated breath of a million travelers circulated in this warren, mingling with the breath of creatures far older; things with voices soft like clay, whose appetites were abominable. How he loved it. The scent, the dark, the thunder.

He stood on the platform and scanned his fellow-travelers critically. There were one or two bodies he contemplated following, but there was so much dross amongst them: so few worth the chase. The

physically wasted, the obese, the ill, the weary. Bodies destroyed by excess and by indifference. As a professional it sickened him, though he understood the weakness that spoiled the best of men.

He lingered in the station for over an hour, wandering between platforms while the trains came and went, came and went, and the people with them. There was so little of quality around it was dispiriting. It seemed he had to wait longer and longer every day to find flesh worthy of use.

It was now almost half past ten and he had not seen a single creature who was really ideal for slaughter. No matter, he told himself, there was time yet. Very soon the theatre crowd would be emerging. They were always good for a sturdy body or two. The well-fed intelligentsia, clutching their ticket-stubs and opining on the diversions of art – oh yes, there'd be something there.

If not, and there were nights when it seemed he would never find something suitable, he'd have to ride downtown and corner a couple of lovers out late, or find an athlete or two, fresh from one of the gyms. They were always sure to offer good material, except that with such healthy specimens there was always the risk of resistance. He remembered catching two black bucks a year ago or more, with maybe forty years between them, father and son perhaps. They'd resisted with knives, and he'd been hospitalized for six weeks. It had been a close fought encounter and one that had set him doubting his skills. Worse, it had made him wonder what his masters would have done with him had he suffered a fatal injury. Would he have been delivered to his family in New Jersey, and given a decent Christian burial? Or would his carcass have been thrown into the dark, for their own use?

The headline of the New York Post, discarded on the seat across from him caught Mahogany's eye: "Police All-Out to Catch Killer'. He couldn't resist a smile. Thoughts of failure, weakness and death evaporated. After all, he was that man, that killer, and tonight the thought of capture was laughable. After all, wasn't his career sanctioned by the highest possible authorities? No policeman could hold him, no court pass judgement on him. The very forces of law and order that made such a show of his pursuit served his masters no less than he; he almost wished some two-bit cop would catch him, take him in triumph before the judge, just to see the looks on their faces when the word came up from the dark that Mahogany was a protected man, above every law on the statute books.

It was now well after ten-thirty. The trickle of theatre goers had begun, but there was nothing likely so far. He'd want to let the rush pass anyway: just follow one or two choice pieces to the end of the line. He bided his time, like any wise hunter.

Kaufman was not finished by eleven, an hour after he'd promised himself release. But exasperation and ennui were making the job more difficult, and the sheets of figures were beginning to blur in front of him. At ten past eleven he threw down his pen and admitted defeat. He rubbed his hot eyes with the cushions of his palms till his head filled with colours.

"Fuck it," he said.

He never swore in company. But once in a while to say fuck it to himself was a great consolation. He made his way out of the office, damp coat over his arm, and headed for the elevator. His limbs felt drugged and his eyes would scarcely stay open.

It was colder outside than he had anticipated, and the air brought him out of his lethargy a little. He walked towards the Subway at 34th Street. Catch an Express to Far Rockaway. Home in an hour.

Neither Kaufman nor Mahogany knew it, but at 96th and Broadway the Police had arrested what they took to be the Subway Killer, having trapped him in one of the up-town trains. A small man of European extraction, wielding a hammer and a saw, had cornered a young woman in the second car and threatened to cut her in half in the name of Jehovah.

Whether he was capable of fulfilling his threat was doubtful. As it was, he didn't get the chance. While the rest of the passengers (including two Marines) looked on, the intended victim landed a kick to the man's testicles. He dropped the hammer. She picked it up and broke his lower jaw and right cheek-bone with it before the Marines stepped in. When the train halted at 96th the Police were waiting to arrest the Subway Butcher. They rushed the car in a horde, yelling like banshees and scared as shit. The Butcher was lying in one corner of the car with his face in pieces. They carted him away, triumphant. The woman, after questioning, went home with the Marines.

It was to be a useful diversion, though Mahogany couldn't know it at the time. It took the Police the best part of the night to determine the identity of their prisoner, chiefly because he couldn't do more than drool through his shattered jaw. It wasn't until three-thirty in the

morning that one Captain Davis, coming on duty, recognized the man as a retired flower salesman from the Bronx called Hank Vasarely. Hank, it seemed, was regularly arrested for threatening behavior and indecent exposure, all in the name of Jehovah. Appearances deceived: he was about as dangerous as the Easter Bunny. This was not the Subway Slaughterer. But by the time the cops had worked that out, Mahogany had been about his business a long while.

It was eleven-fifteen when Kaufman got on the Express through to Mott Avenue. He shared the car with two other travelers. One was a middle-aged black woman in a purple coat, the other a pale, acne-ridden adolescent who was staring at the "Kiss My White Ass' graffiti on the ceiling with spaced-out eyes.

Kaufman was in the first car. He had a journey of thirty-five minutes' duration ahead of him. He let his eyes slide closed, reassured by the rhythmical rocking of the train. It was a tedious journey and he was tired. He didn't see Mahogany's face, either, staring through the door between the cars, looking through for some more meat. At 14th Street the black woman got out. Nobody got in. Kaufman opened his eyes briefly, taking in the empty platform at 14th, then shut them again. The doors hissed closed. He was drifting in that warm somewhere between awareness and sleep and there was a fluttering of nascent dreams in his head. It was a good feeling. The train was off again, rattling down into the tunnels.

Maybe, at the back of his dozing mind, Kaufman half-registered that the doors between the second and first cars had been slid open. Maybe he smelt the sudden gush of tunnel-air, and registered that the noise of wheels was momentarily louder. But he chose to ignore it.

Maybe he even heard the scuffle as Mahogany subdued the youth with the spaced-out stare. But the sound was too distant and the promise of sleep was too tempting. He drowsed on.

For some reason his dreams were of his mother's kitchen. She was chopping turnips and smiling sweetly as she chopped. He was only small in his dream and was looking up at her radiant face while she worked. Chop. Chop. Chop.

His eyes jerked open. His mother vanished. The car was empty and the youth was gone.

How long had he been dozing? He hadn't remembered the train stopping at West 4th Street. He got up, his head full of slumber, and

almost fell over as the train rocked violently. It seemed to have gathered quite a substantial head of speed. Maybe the driver was keen to be home, wrapped up in bed with his wife. They were going at a fair lick; in fact it was bloody terrifying.

There was a blind drawn down over the window between the cars which hadn't been down before as he remembered. A little concern crept into Kaufman's sober head. Suppose he'd been sleeping a long while, and the guard had overlooked him in the car. Perhaps they'd passed Far Rockaway and the train was now speeding on its way to wherever they took the trains for the night.

"Fuck it," he said aloud.

Should he go forward and ask the driver? It was such a bloody idiot question to ask: where am I? At this time of night was he likely to get more than a stream of abuse by way of reply?

Then the train began to slow.

A station. Yes, a station. The train emerged from the tunnel and into the dirty light of the station at West 4th Street. He'd missed no stops…

So where had the boy gone?

He'd either ignored the warning on the car wall forbidding transfer between the cars while in transit, or else he'd gone into the driver's cabin up front. Probably between the driver's legs even now, Kaufman thought, his lip curling. It wasn't unheard of. This was the Palace of Delights, after all, and everyone had their right to a little love in the dark.

Kaufman shrugged to himself. What did he care where the boy had gone?

The doors closed. Nobody had boarded the train. It shunted off from the station, the lights flickering as it used a surge of power to pick up some speed again.

Kaufman felt the desire for sleep come over him afresh, but the sudden fear of being lost had pumped adrenalin into his system, and his limbs were tingling with nervous energy.

His senses were sharpened too.

Even over the clatter and the rumble of the wheels on the tracks, he

heard the sound of tearing cloth coming from the next car. Was someone tearing their shirt off?

He stood up, grasping one of the straps for balance.

The window between the cars was completely curtained off, but he stared at it, frowning, as though he might suddenly discover X-ray vision. The car rocked and rolled. It was really travelling again.

Another ripping sound.

Was it rape?

With no more than a mild voyeuristic urge he moved down the see-sawing car towards the intersecting door, hoping there might be a chink in the curtain. His eyes were still fixed on the window, and he failed to notice the splatters of blood he was treading in. Until – his heel slipped. He looked down. His stomach almost saw the blood before his brain and the ham on whole-wheat was half-way up his gullet catching in the back of his throat. Blood. He took several large gulps of stale air and looked away – back at the window.

His head was saying: blood. Nothing would make the word go away.

There was no more than a yard or two between him and the door now. He had to look. There was blood on his shoe, and a thin trail to the next car, but he still had to look.

He had to.

He took two more steps to the door and scanned the curtain looking for a flaw in the blind: a pulled thread in the weave would be sufficient. There was a tiny hole. He glued his eye to it.

His mind refused to accept what his eyes were seeing beyond the door. It rejected the spectacle as preposterous, as a dreamed sight. His reason said it couldn't be real, but his flesh knew it was. His body became rigid with terror. His eyes, unblinking, could not close off the appalling scene through the curtain. He stayed at the door while the train rattled on, while his blood drained from his extremities, and his brain reeled from lack of oxygen. Bright spots of light flashed in front of his vision, blotting out the atrocity.

Then he fainted.

He was unconscious when the train reached Jay Street. He was deaf to the driver's announcement that all travelers beyond that station would have to change trains. Had he heard this he would have questioned the sense of it. No trains disgorged all their passengers at Jay Street; the line ran to Mott Avenue, via the Aqueduct Race Track, past JFK Airport. He would have asked what kind of train this could be. Except that he already knew. The truth was hanging in the next car. It was smiling contentedly to itself from behind a bloody chain-mail apron. This was the Midnight Meat Train.

There's no accounting for time in a dead faint. It could have been seconds or hours that passed before Kaufman's eyes flickered open again, and his mind focused on his new-found situation.

He lay under one of the seats now, sprawled along the vibrating wall of the car, hidden from view. Fate was with him so far he thought: somehow the rocking of the car must have jockeyed his unconscious body out of sight. He thought of the horror in Car Two, and swallowed back vomit. He was alone. Wherever the guard was (murdered perhaps), there was no way he could call for help. And the driver? Was he dead at his controls? Was the train even now hurtling through an unknown tunnel, a tunnel without a single station to identify it, towards its destruction? And if there was no crash to be killed in, there was always the Butcher, still hacking away a door's thickness from where Kaufman lay.

Whichever way he turned, the name on the door was Death.

The noise was deafening, especially lying on the floor. Kaufman's teeth were shaking in their sockets and his face felt numb with the vibration; even his skull was aching.

Gradually he felt strength seeping back into his exhausted limbs. He cautiously stretched his fingers and clenched his fists, to set the blood flowing there again.

And as the feeling returned, so did the nausea. He kept seeing the grisly brutality of the next car. He'd seen photographs of murder victims before, of course, but these were no common murders. He was in the same train as the Subway Butcher, the monster who strung his victims up by the feet from the straps, hairless and naked. How long would it be before the killer stepped through that door and claimed him? He was sure that if the slaughterer didn't finish him, expectation would.

He heard movement beyond the door.

Instinct took over. Kaufman thrust himself further under the seat and tucked himself up into a tiny ball, with his sickwhite face to the wall. Then he covered his head with his hands and closed his eyes as tightly as any child in terror of the Bogeyman.

The door was slid open. Click. Whoosh. A rush of air up from the rails. It smelt stranger than any Kaufman had smelt before: and colder. This was somehow primal air in his nostrils, hostile and unfathomable air. It made him shudder.

The door closed. Click.

The Butcher was close, Kaufman knew it. He could be standing no more than a matter of inches from where he lay. Was he even now looking down at Kaufman's back? Even now bending, knife in hand, to scoop Kaufman out of his hiding place, like a snail hooked from its shell?

Nothing happened. He felt no breath on his neck. His spine was not slit open.

There was simply a clatter of feet close to Kaufman's head; then that same sound receding.

Kaufman's breath, held in his lungs 'til they hurt, was expelled in a rasp between his teeth.

Mahogany was almost disappointed that the sleeping man had alighted at West 4th Street. He was hoping for one more job to do that night, to keep him occupied while they descended. But no: the man had gone. The potential victim hadn't looked that healthy anyway, he thought to himself, he was an anemic Jewish accountant probably. The meat wouldn't have been of any quality. Mahogany walked the length of the car to the driver's cabin. He'd spend the rest of the journey there.

My Christ, thought Kaufman, he's going to kill the driver.

He heard the cabin door open. Then the voice of the Butcher: low and hoarse.

"Hi."

"Hi."

They knew each other.

"All done?"

"All done."

Kaufman was shocked by the banality of the exchange. All done? What did that mean: all done? He missed the next few words as the train hit a particularly noisy section of track.

Kaufman could resist looking no longer. Warily he uncurled himself and glanced over his shoulder down the length of the car. All he could see was the Butcher's legs, and the bottom of the open cabin door. Damn. He wanted to see the monster's face again.

There was laughter now.

Kaufman calculated the risks of his situation: the mathematics of panic. If he remained where he was, sooner or later the Butcher would glance down at him, and he'd be mincemeat. On the other hand, if he were to move from his hiding place he would risk being seen and pursued. Which was worse: stasis, and meeting his death trapped in a hole; or making a break for it and confronting his Maker in the middle of the car?

Kaufman surprised himself with his mettle: he'd move.

Infinitesimally slowly he crawled out from under the seat, watching the Butcher's back every minute as he did so. Once out, he began to crawl towards the door. Each step he took was a torment, but the Butcher seemed far too engrossed in his conversation to turn round.

Kaufman had reached the door. He began to stand up, trying all the while to prepare himself for the sight he would meet in Car Two. The handle was grasped; and he slid the door open.

The noise of the rails increased, and a wave of dank air, stinking of nothing on earth, came up at him. Surely the Butcher must hear, or smell? Surely he must turn -But no. Kaufman skinned his way through the slit he had opened and so through into the bloody chamber beyond.

Relief made him careless. He failed to latch the door properly behind him and it began to slide open with the buffeting of the train.

Mahogany put his head out of the cabin and stared down the car

towards the door.

"What the fuck's that?" said the driver.

"Didn't close the door properly. That's all."

Kaufman heard the Butcher walking towards the door. He crouched, a ball of consternation, against the intersecting wall, suddenly aware of how full his bowels were. The door was pulled closed from the other side, and the footsteps receded again.

Safe, for another breath at least.

Kaufman opened his eyes, steeling himself for the slaughter-pen in front of him.

There was no avoiding it.

It filled every one of his senses: the smell of opened entrails, the sight of the bodies, the feel of fluid on the floor under his fingers, the sound of the straps creaking beneath the weight of the corpses, even the air, tasting salty with blood. He was with death absolutely in that cubby-hole, hurtling through the dark.

But there was no nausea now. There was no feeling left but a casual revulsion. He even found himself peering at the bodies with some curiosity.

The carcass closest to him was the remains of the pimply youth he'd seen in Car One. The body hung upside-down, swinging back and forth to the rhythm of the train, in unison with its three fellows; an obscene dance macabre.

Its arms dangled loosely from the shoulder joints, into which gashes an inch or two deep had been made, so the bodies would hang more neatly.

Every part of the dead kid's anatomy was swaying hypnotically. The tongue, hanging from the open mouth. The head, lolling on its slit neck. Even the youth's penis flapped from side to side on his plucked groin. The head wound and the open jugular still pulsed blood into a black bucket. There was an elegance about the whole sight: the sign of a job well-done.

Beyond that body were the strung-up corpses of two young white women and a darker skinned male. Kaufman turned his head on one

side to look at their faces. They were quite blank. One of the girls was a beauty. He decided the male had been Puerto Rican. All were shorn of their head and body hair. In fact the air was still pungent with the smell of the shearing. Kaufman slid up the wall out of the crouching position, and as he did so one of the women's bodies turned around, presenting a dorsal view.

He was not prepared for this last horror.

The meat of her back had been entirely cleft open from neck to buttock and the muscle had been peeled back to expose the glistening vertebrae. It was the final triumph of the Butcher's craft. Here they hung, these shaved, bled, slit slabs of humanity, opened up like fish, and ripe for devouring.

Kaufman almost smiled at the perfection of its horror. He felt an offer of insanity tickling the base of his skull, tempting him into oblivion, promising a blank indifference to the world.

He began to shake, uncontrollably. He felt his vocal cords trying to form a scream. It was intolerable: and yet to scream was to become in a short while like the creatures in front of him.

"Fuck it," he said, more loudly than he'd intended, then pushing himself off from the wall he began to walk down the car between the swaying corpses, observing the neat piles of clothes and belongings that sat on the seats beside their owners. Under his feet the floor was sticky with drying bile. Even with his eyes closed to cracks he could see the blood in the buckets too clearly: it was thick and heady, flecks of grit turning in it.

He was past the youth now and he could see the door into Car Three ahead. All he had to do was run this gauntlet of atrocities. He urged himself on, trying to ignore the horrors, and concentrate on the door that would lead him back into sanity.

He was past the first woman. A few more yards, he said to himself, ten steps at most, less if he walked with confidence.

Then the lights went out.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

The train lurched, and Kaufman lost his balance.

In the utter blackness he reached out for support and his flailing

arms encompassed the body beside him. Before he could prevent himself he felt his hands sinking into the lukewarm flesh, and his fingers grasping the open edge of muscle on the dead woman's back, his fingertips touching the bone of her spine. His cheek was laid against the bald flesh of the thigh.

He screamed; and even as he screamed, the lights flickered back on.

And as they flickered back on, and his scream died, he heard the noise of the Butcher's feet approaching down the length of Car One towards the intervening door.

He let go of the body he was embracing. His face was smeared with blood from her leg. He could feel it on his cheek, like war paint.

The scream had cleared Kaufman's head and he suddenly felt released into a kind of strength. There would be no pursuit down the train, he knew that: there would be no cowardice, not now. This was going to be a primitive confrontation, two human beings, face to face. And there would be no trick – none – that he couldn't contemplate using to bring his enemy down. This was a matter of survival, pure and simple.

The door-handle rattled.

Kaufman looked around for a weapon, his eye steady and calculating. His gaze fell on the pile of clothes beside the Puerto Rican's body. There was a knife there, lying amongst the rhinestone rings and the imitation gold chains. A long-bladed, immaculately clean weapon, probably the man's pride and joy. Reaching past the well-muscled body, Kaufman plucked the knife from the heap. It felt good in his hand; in fact it felt positively thrilling. The door was opening, and the face of the slaughterer came into view.

Kaufman looked down the abattoir at Mahogany. He was not terribly fearsome, just another balding, overweight man of fifty. His face was heavy and his eyes deep-set. His mouth was rather small and delicately lipped. In fact he had a woman's mouth.

Mahogany could not understand where this intruder had appeared from, but he was aware that it was another oversight, another sign of increasing incompetence. He must dispatch this ragged creature immediately. After all they could not be more than a mile or two from the end of the line. He must cut the little man down and have him hanging up by his heels before they reached their destination.

He moved into Car Two.

"You were asleep," he said, recognizing Kaufman. "I saw you."

Kaufman said nothing.

"You should have left the train. What were you trying to do? Hide from me?"

Kaufman still kept his silence.

Mahogany grasped the hand of the cleaver hanging from his well-used leather belt. It was dirty with blood, as was his chain-mail apron, his hammer and his saw.

"As it is," he said, "I'll have to do away with you." Kaufman raised the knife. It looked a little small beside the Butcher's paraphernalia.

"Fuck it," he said.

Mahogany grinned at the little man's pretensions to defence.

"You shouldn't have seen this: it's not for the likes of you," he said, taking another step towards Kaufman. "It's secret."

Oh, so he's the divinely-inspired type is he? Thought Kaufman. That explains something.

"Fuck it," he said again.

The Butcher frowned. He didn't like the little man's indifference to his work, to his reputation. "We all have to die some time," he said. "You should be well pleased: you're not going to be burnt up like most of them: I can use you. To feed the fathers."

Kaufman's only response was a grin. He was past being terrorized by this gross, shambling hulk. The Butcher unhooked the cleaver from his belt and brandished it.

"A dirty little Jew like you," he said, "should be thankful to be useful at all: meat's the best you can aspire to." Without warning, the Butcher swung. The cleaver divided the air at some speed, but Kaufman stepped back. The cleaver sliced his coat-arm and buried itself in the Puerto Rican's shank. The impact half-severed the leg and the weight of the body opened the gash even further. The exposed meat of the thigh was like prime steak, succulent and appetizing.

The Butcher started to drag the cleaver out of the wound, and in that moment Kaufman sprang. The knife sped towards Mahogany's eye, but an error of judgement buried it instead in his neck. It transfixed the column and appeared in a little gout of gore on the other side. Straight through. In one stroke. Straight through. Mahogany felt the blade in his neck as a choking sensation, almost as though he had caught a chicken bone in his throat. He made a ridiculous, half-hearted coughing sound. Blood issued from his lips, painting them, like lipstick on his woman's mouth. The cleaver clattered to the floor.

Kaufman pulled out the knife. The two wounds spouted little arcs of blood.

Mahogany collapsed to his knees, staring at the knife that had killed him. The little man was watching him quite passively. He was saying something, but Mahogany's ears were deaf to the remarks, as though he was under water. Mahogany suddenly went blind. He knew with a nostalgia for his senses that he would not see or hear again. This was death: it was on him for certain.

His hands still felt the weave of his trousers, however, and the hot splashes on his skin. His life seemed to totter on its tiptoes while his fingers grasped at one last sense.

Then his body collapsed, and his hands, and his life, and his sacred duty folded up under a weight of grey flesh. The Butcher was dead.

Kaufman dragged gulps of stale air into his lungs and grabbed one of the straps to steady his reeling body. Tears blotted out the shambles he stood in. A time passed: he didn't know how long; he was lost in a dream of victory. Then the train began to slow. He felt and heard the brakes being applied. The hanging bodies lurched forward as the careering train slowed, its wheels squealing on rails that were sweating slime.

Curiosity overtook Kaufman.

Would the train shunt into the Butcher's underground slaughterhouse, decorated with the meats he had gathered through his career? And the laughing driver, so indifferent to the massacre, what would he do once the train had stopped? Whatever happened now was academic. He could face anything at all; watch and see. The tannoy crackled. The voice of the driver: "We're here man. Better take your place eh?"

Take your place? What did that mean?

The train had slowed to a snail's pace. Outside the windows, everything was as dark as ever. The lights flickered, then went out. This time they didn't come back on.

Kaufman was left in total darkness.

"We'll be out in half-an-hour," the tannoy announced, so like any station report.

The train had come to a stop. The sound of its wheels on the tracks, the rush of its passage, which Kaufman had grown so used to, were suddenly absent. All he could hear was the hum of the tannoy. He could still see nothing at all.

Then, a hiss. The doors were opening. A smell entered the car, a smell so caustic that Kaufman clapped his hand over his face to shut it out.

He stood in silence, hand to mouth, for what seemed a lifetime. See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil. Then, there was a flicker of light outside the window. It threw the door frame into silhouette, and it grew stronger by degrees. Soon there was sufficient light in the car for Kaufman to see the crumpled body of the Butcher at his feet, and the sallow sides of meat hanging on every side of him.

There was a whisper too, from the dark outside the train, a gathering of tiny noises like the voices of beetles. In the tunnel, shuffling towards the train, were human beings. Kaufman could see their outlines now. Some of them carried torches, which burned with a dead brown light. The noise was perhaps their feet on the damp earth, or perhaps their tongues clicking, or both.

Kaufman wasn't as naive as he'd been an hour before. Could there be any doubt as to the intention these things had, coming out of the blackness towards the train? The Butcher had slaughtered the men and women as meat for these cannibals, they were coming, like diners at the dinner-gong, to eat in this restaurant car.

Kaufman bent down and picked up the cleaver the Butcher had dropped. The noise of the creatures' approach was louder every moment. He backed down the car away from the open doors, only to find that the doors behind him were also open, and there was the whisper of approach there too.

He shrank back against one of the seats, and was about to take refuge under them when a hand, thin and frail to the point of transparency appeared around the door.

He could not look away. Not that terror froze him as it had at the window. He simply wanted to watch. The creature stepped into the car. The torches behind it threw its face into shadow, but its outline could be clearly seen.

There was nothing very remarkable about it.

It had two arms and two legs as he did; its head was not abnormally shaped. The body was small, and the effort of climbing into the train made its breath coarse. It seemed more geriatric than psychotic; generations of fictional maneaters had not prepared him for its distressing vulnerability.

Behind it, similar creatures were appearing out of the darkness, shuffling into the train. In fact they were coming in at every door.

Kaufman was trapped. He weighed the cleaver in his hands, getting the balance of it, ready for the battle with these antique monsters. A torch had been brought into the car, and it illuminated the faces of the leaders. They were completely bald. The tired flesh of their faces was pulled tight over their skulls, so that it shone with tension. There were stains of decay and disease on their skin, and in places the muscle had withered to a black pus, through which the bone of cheek or temple was showing. Some of them were naked as babies, their pulpy, syphilitic bodies scarcely sexed. What had been breasts were leathery bags hanging off the torso, the genitalia shrunken away. Worse sights than the naked amongst them were those who wore a veil of clothes. It soon dawned on Kaufman that the rotting fabric slung around their shoulders, or knotted about their midriffs was made of human skins. Not one, but a dozen or more, heaped haphazardly on top of each other, like pathetic trophies.

The leaders of this grotesque meal-line had reached the bodies now, and the gracile hands were laid upon the shanks of meat, and were running up and down the shaved flesh in a manner that suggested sensual pleasure. Tongues were dancing out of mouths, flecks of spittle landing on the meat. The eyes of the monsters were flickering back and forth with hunger and excitement.

Eventually one of them saw Kaufman.

Its eyes stopped flickering for a moment, and fixed on him. A look

of enquiry came over the face, making a parody of puzzlement.

"You," it said. The voice was as wasted as the lips it came from.

Kaufman raised the cleaver a little, calculating his chances. There were perhaps thirty of them in the car and many more outside. But they looked so weak, and they had no weapons, but their skin and bones.

The monster spoke again, its voice quite well modulated, when it found itself, the piping of a once-cultured, once charming man.

"You came after the other, yes?"

It glanced down at the body of Mahogany. It had clearly taken in the situation very quickly. "Old anyway," it said, its watery eyes back on Kaufman, studying him with care.

"Fuck you," said Kaufman.

The creature attempted a wry smile, but it had almost forgotten the technique and the result was a grimace which exposed a mouthful of teeth that had been systematically filed into points.

"You must now do this for us," it said through the bestial grin.

"We cannot survive without food."

The hand patted the rump of human flesh. Kaufman had no reply to the idea. He just stared in disgust as the fingernails slid between the cleft in the buttocks, feeling the swell of tender muscle.

"It disgusts us no less than you," said the creature. "But we're bound to eat this meat, or we die. God knows, I have no appetite for it."

The thing was drooling nevertheless.

Kaufman found his voice. It was small, more with a confusion of feelings than with fear.

"What are you?" He remembered the bearded man in the Deli.

"Are you accidents of some kind?"

"We are the City fathers," the thing said. "And mothers, and daughters and sons. The builders, the law-makers. We made this city."

"New York?" said Kaufman. The Palace of Delights? "Before you were born, before anyone living was born." As it spoke the creature's fingernails were running up under the skin of the split body, and were peeling the thin elastic layer off the luscious brawn. Behind Kaufman, the other creatures had begun to unhook the bodies from the straps, their hands laid in that same delighting manner on the smooth breasts and flanks of flesh. These too had begun skinning the meat.

"You will bring us more," the father said. "More meat for us. The other one was weak."

Kaufman stared in disbelief.

"Me?" he said. "Feed you? What do you think I am?"

"You must do it for us, and for those older than us. For those born before the city was thought of, when America was a timberland and desert."

The fragile hand gestured out of the train.

Kaufman's gaze followed the pointing finger into the gloom. There was something else outside the train which he'd failed to see before; much bigger than anything human.

The pack of creatures parted to let Kaufman through so that he could inspect more closely whatever it was that stood outside, but his feet would not move.

"Go on," said the father.

Kaufman thought of the city he'd loved. Were these really its ancients, its philosophers, its creators? He had to believe it. Perhaps there were people on the surface -bureaucrats, politicians, authorities of every kind – who knew this horrible secret and whose lives were dedicated to preserving these abominations, feeding them, as savages feed lambs to their gods. There was a horrible familiarity about this ritual. It rang a bell – not in Kaufman's conscious mind, but in his deeper, older self.

His feet, no longer obeying his mind, but his instinct to worship, moved. He walked through the corridor of bodies and stepped out of the train.

The light of the torches scarcely began to illuminate the limitless darkness outside. The air seemed solid, it was so thick with the smell

of ancient earth. But Kaufman smelt nothing. His head bowed, it was all he could do to prevent himself from fainting again.

It was there; the precursor of man. The original American, whose homeland this was before Passamaquoddy or Cheyenne. Its eyes, if it had eyes, were on him.

His body shook. His teeth chattered.

He could hear the noise of its anatomy: ticking, crackling, sobbing.

It shifted a little in the dark.

The sound of its movement was awesome. Like a mountain sitting up.

Kaufman's face was raised to it, and without thinking about what he was doing or why, he fell to his knees in the shit in front of the Father of Fathers.

Every day of his life had been leading to this day, every moment quickening to this incalculable moment of holy terror.

Had there been sufficient light in that pit to see the whole, perhaps his tepid heart would have burst. As it was he felt it flutter in his chest as he saw what he saw.

It was a giant. Without head or limb. Without a feature that was analogous to human, without an organ that made sense, or senses. If it was like anything, it was like a shoal of fish. A thousand snouts all moving in unison, budding, blossoming and withering rhythmically. It was iridescent, like mother of pearl, but it was sometimes deeper than any colour Kaufman knew, or could put a name to.

That was all Kaufman could see, and it was more than he wanted to see. There was much more in the darkness, flickering and flapping.

But he could look no longer. He turned away, and as he did so a football was pitched out of the train and rolled to a halt in front of the Father.

At least he thought it was a football, until he peered more attentively at it, and recognized it as a human head, the head of the Butcher. The skin of the face had been peeled off in strips. It glistened with blood as it lay in front of its Lord.

Kaufman looked away, and walked back to the train. Every part of his body seemed to be weeping but his eyes. They were too hot with the sight behind him, they boiled his tears away.

Inside, the creatures had already set about their supper. One, he saw, was plucking the blue sweet morsel of a woman's eye out of the socket. Another had a hand in its mouth. At Kaufman's feet lay the Butcher's headless corpse, still bleeding profusely from where its neck had been bitten through.

The little father who had spoken earlier stood in front of Kaufman.

"Serve us?" it asked, gently, as you might ask a cow to follow you.

Kaufman was staring at the cleaver, the Butcher's symbol of office. The creatures were leaving the car now, dragging the half-eaten bodies after them. As the torches were taken out of the car, darkness was returning. But before the lights had completely disappeared the father reached out and took hold of Kaufman's face, thrusting him round to look at himself in the filthy glass of the car window.

It was a thin reflection, but Kaufman could see quite well enough how changed he was. Whiter than any living man should be, covered in grime and blood.

The father's hand still gripped Kaufman's face, and its forefinger hooked into his mouth and down his gullet, the nail scoring the back of his throat. Kaufman gagged on the intruder, but had no will left to repel the attack. "Serve," said the creature. "In silence."

Too late, Kaufman realized the intention of the fingers.

Suddenly his tongue was seized tight and twisted on the root. Kaufman, in shock, dropped the cleaver. He tried to scream, but no sound came. Blood was in his throat, he heard his flesh tearing, and agonies convulsed him. Then the hand was out of his mouth and the scarlet, spittle-covered fingers were in front of his face, with his tongue, held between thumb and forefinger.

Kaufman was speechless.

"Serve," said the father, and stuffed the tongue into his own mouth, chewing on it with evident satisfaction. Kaufman fell to his knees, spewing up his sandwich.

The father was already shuffling away into the dark; the rest of the

ancients had disappeared into their warren for another night.

The tannoy crackled.

"Home," said the driver.

The doors hissed closed and the sound of power surged through the train. The lights flickered on, then off again, then on.

The train began to move.

Kaufman lay on the floor, tears pouring down his face, tears of discomfiture and of resignation. He would bleed to death, he decided, where he lay. It wouldn't matter if he died. It was a foul world anyway.

The driver woke him. He opened his eyes. The face that was looking down at him was black, and not unfriendly. It grinned. Kaufman tried to say something, but his mouth was sealed up with dried blood. He jerked his head around like a driveller trying to spit out a word. Nothing came but grunts.

He wasn't dead. He hadn't bled to death.

The driver pulled him to his knees, talking to him as though he were a three-year-old.

"You got a job to do, my man: they're very pleased with you."

The driver had licked his fingers, and was rubbing Kaufman's swollen lips, trying to part them. "Lots to learn before tomorrow night…"

Lots to learn. Lots to learn.

He led Kaufman out of the train. They were in no station he had ever seen before. It was white-tiled and absolutely pristine; a station-keeper's Nirvana. No graffiti disfigured the walls. There were no token-booths, but then there were no gates and no passengers either. This was a line that provided only one service: The Meat Train. A morning shift of cleaners were already busy hosing the blood off the seats and the floor of the train. Somebody was stripping the Butcher's body, in preparation for dispatch to New Jersey. All around Kaufman people were at work.

A rain of dawn light was pouring through a grating in the roof of

the station. Motes of dust hung in the beams, turning over and over. Kaufman watched them, entranced. He hadn't seen such a beautiful thing since he was a child. Lovely dust. Over and over, and over and over.

The driver had managed to separate Kaufman's lips. His mouth was too wounded for him to move it, but at least he could breathe easily. And the pain was already beginning to subside.

The driver smiled at him, then turned to the rest of the workers in the station.

"I'd like to introduce Mahogany's replacement. Our new butcher," he announced.

The workers looked at Kaufman. There was a certain deference in their faces, which he found appealing. Kaufman looked up at the sunlight, now falling all around him. He jerked his head, signifying that he wanted to go up, into the open air. The driver nodded, and led him up a steep flight of steps and through an alley-way and so out on to the sidewalk.

It was a beautiful day. The bright sky over New York was streaked with filaments of pale pink cloud, and the air smelt of morning.

The Streets and Avenues were practically empty. At a distance an occasional cab crossed an intersection, its engine a whisper; a runner sweated past on the other side of the street.

Very soon these same deserted sidewalks would be thronged with people. The city would go about its business in ignorance: never knowing what it was built upon, or what it owed its life to. Without hesitation, Kaufman fell to his knees and kissed the dirty concrete with his bloody lips, silently swearing his eternal loyalty to its continuance.

The Palace of Delights received the adoration without comment.

III: THE YATTERING AND JACK

Why the powers (long may they hold court; long may they shit light on the heads of the damned) had sent it out from Hell to stalk Jack Polo, the Yattering couldn't discover. Whenever he passed a tentative enquiry along the system to his master, just asking the simple question, "What am I doing here?" it was answered with a swift rebuke for its curiosity. None of its business, came the reply, its business was to do. Or die trying. And after six months of pursuing Polo, the Yattering was beginning to see extinction as an easy option. This endless game of hide and seek was to nobody's benefit, and to the Yattering's immense frustration. It feared ulcers, it feared psychosomatic leprosy (a condition lower demons like itself were susceptible to), worst of all it feared losing its temper completely and killing the man outright in an uncontrollable fit of pique.

What was Jack Polo anyway?

A gherkin importer; by the balls of Leviticus, he was simply a gherkin importer. His life was worn out, his family was dull, his politics were simple-minded and his theology non-existent. The man was a no-account, one of nature's blankest little numbers – why bother with the likes of him? This wasn't a Faust: a pact-maker, a soul-seller. This one wouldn't look twice at the chance of divine inspiration: he'd sniff, shrug and get on with his gherkin importing. Yet the Yattering was bound to that house, long night and longer day, until he had the man a lunatic, or as good as. It was going to be a lengthy job, if not interminable. Yes, there were times when even psychosomatic leprosy would be bearable if it meant being invalided off this impossible mission.

For his part, Jack J. Polo continued to be the most unknowing of men. He had always been that way; indeed his history was littered with the victims of his naïvetй. When his late, lamented wife had cheated on him (he'd been in the house on at least two of the occasions, watching the television) he was the last one to find out. And the clues they'd left behind them! A blind, deaf and dumb man would have become suspicious. Not Jack. He pottered about his dull business and never noticed the tang of the adulterer's cologne, nor the abnormal regularity with which his wife changed the bed-linen.

He was no less disinterested in events when his younger daughter Amanda confessed her lesbianism to him. His response was a sigh and

a puzzled look.

"Well, as long as you don't get pregnant, darling," he replied, and sauntered off into the garden, blithe as ever. What chance did a fury have with a man like that?

To a creature trained to put its meddling fingers into the wounds of the human psyche, Polo offered a surface so glacial, so utterly without distinguishing marks, as to deny malice any hold whatsoever.

Events seemed to make no dent in his perfect indifference. His life's disasters seemed not to scar his mind at all. When, eventually, he was confronted with the truth about his wife's infidelity (he found them screwing in the bath) he couldn't bring himself to be hurt or humiliated.

"These things happen," he said to himself, backing out of the bathroom to let them finish what they'd started. "Che sera, sera."

Che sera, sera. The man muttered that damn phrase with monotonous regularity. He seemed to live by that philosophy of fatalism, letting attacks on his manhood, ambition and dignity slide off his ego like rain-water from his bald head.

The Yattering had heard Polo's wife confess all to her husband (it was hanging upside down from the light-fitting, invisible as ever) and the scene had made it wince. There was the distraught sinner, begging to be accused, bawled at, struck even, and instead of giving her the satisfaction of his hatred, Polo had just shrugged and let her say her piece without a word of interruption, until she had no more to embosom. She'd left, at length, more out of frustration and sorrow than guilt; the Yattering had heard her tell the bathroom mirror how insulted she was at her husband's lack of righteous anger. A little while after she'd flung herself off the balcony of the Roxy Cinema. Her suicide was in some ways convenient for the fury. With the wife gone, and the daughters away from home, it could plan for more elaborate tricks to unnerve its victim, without ever having to concern itself with revealing its presence to creatures the powers had not marked for attack.

But the absence of the wife left the house empty during the days, and that soon became a burden of boredom the Yattering found scarcely supportable. The hours from nine to five, alone in the house, often seemed endless. It would mope and wander, planning bizarre and impractical revenges upon the Polo-man, pacing the rooms,

heartsick, companioned only by the clicks and whirrs of the house as the radiators cooled, or the refrigerator switched itself on and off. The situation rapidly became so desperate that the arrival of the midday post became the high-point of the day, and an unshakeable melancholy would settle on the Yattering if the postman had nothing to deliver and passed by to the next house.

When Jack returned the games would begin in earnest. The usual warm-up routine: it would meet Jack at the door and prevent his key from turning in the lock. The contest would go on for a minute or two until Jack accidentally found the measure of the Yattering's resistance, and won the day. Once inside, it would start all the lampshades swinging. The man would usually ignore this performance, however violent the motion. Perhaps he might shrug and murmur: "Subsidence," under his breath, then, inevitably, "Che sera, sera."

In the bathroom, the Yattering would have squeezed toothpaste around the toilet-seat and have plugged up the shower-head with soggy toilet-paper. It would even share the shower with Jack, hanging unseen from the rail that held up the shower curtain and murmuring obscene suggestions in his ear. That was always successful, the demons were taught at the Academy. The obscenities in the ear routine never failed to distress clients, making them think they were conceiving of these pernicious acts themselves, and driving them to self-disgust, then to self-rejection and finally to madness. Of course, in a few cases the victims would be so inflamed by these whispered suggestions they'd go out on the streets and act upon them. Under such circumstances the victim would often be arrested and incarcerated. Prison would lead to further crimes, and a slow dwindling of moral reserves – and the victory was won by that route. One way or another insanity would out.

Except that for some reason this rule did not apply to Polo; he was imperturbable: a tower of propriety.

Indeed, the way things were going the Yattering would be the one to break. It was tired; so very tired. Endless days of tormenting the cat, reading the funnies in yesterday's newspaper, watching the game shows: they drained the fury. Lately, it had developed a passion for the woman who lived across the street from Polo. She was a young widow; and seemed to spend most of her life parading around the house stark naked. It was almost unbearable sometimes, in the middle of a day when the postman failed to call, watching the woman and knowing it could never cross the threshold of Polo's house.

This was the Law. The Yattering was a minor demon, and his soul-catching was strictly confined to the perimeters of his victim's house. To step outside was to relinquish all powers over the victim: to put itself at the mercy of humanity.

All June, all July and most of August it sweated in its prison, and all through those bright, hot months Jack Polo maintained complete indifference to the Yattering's attacks.

It was deeply embarrassing, and it was gradually destroying the demon's self-confidence, seeing this bland victim survive every trial and trick attempted upon him.

The Yattering wept.

The Yattering screamed.

In a fit of uncontrollable anguish, it boiled the water in the aquarium, poaching the guppies.

Polo heard nothing. Saw nothing.

At last, in late September, the Yattering broke one of the first rules of its condition, and appealed directly to its masters.

Autumn is Hell's season; and the demons of the higher dominations were feeling benign. They condescended to speak to their creature.

"What do you want?" asked Beelzebub, his voice blackening the air in the lounge.

"This man…" the Yattering began nervously.

"Yes?"

"This Polo…"

"Yes?"

"I am without issue upon him. I can't get panic upon him, I can't breed fear or even mild concern upon him. I am sterile, Lord of the Flies, and I wish to be put out of my misery."

For a moment Beelzebub's face formed in the mirror over the mantelpiece.

"You want what?"

Beelzebub was part elephant, part wasp. The Yattering was terrified.

"I – want to die."

"You cannot die."

"From this world. Just die from this world. Fade away. Be replaced."

"You will not die."

"But I can't break him!" the Yattering shrieked, tearful.

"You must."

"Why?"

"Because we tell you to." Beelzebub always used the Royal 'we', though unqualified to do so. "Let me at least know why I'm in this house," the Yattering appealed. "What is he? Nothing! He's nothing!" Beelzebub found this rich. He laughed, buzzed, trumpeted.

"Jack Johnson Polo is the child of a worshipper at the Church of Lost Salvation. He belongs to us." "But why should you want him? He's so dull."

"We want him because his soul was promised to us, and his mother did not deliver it. Or herself come to that. She cheated us. She died in the arms of a priest, and was safely escorted to -"

The word that followed was anathema. The Lord of the Flies could barely bring himself to pronounce it."- Heaven," said Beelzebub, with infinite loss in his voice.

"Heaven," said the Yattering, not knowing quite what was meant by the word.

"Polo is to be hounded in the name of the Old One, and punished for his mother's crimes. No torment is too profound for a family that has cheated us."

"I'm tired," the Yattering pleaded, daring to approach the mirror.

"Please. I beg you."

"Claim this man," said Beelzebub, "or you will suffer in his place."

The figure in the mirror waved its black and yellow trunk and

faded.

"Where is your pride?" said the master's voice as it shriveled into distance. "Pride, Yattering, pride." Then he was gone.

In its frustration the Yattering picked up the cat and threw it into the fire, where it was rapidly cremated. If only the law allowed such easy cruelty to be visited upon human flesh, it thought. If only. If only. Then it'd make Polo suffer such torments. But no. The Yattering knew the laws as well as the back of its hand; they had been flayed on to its exposed cortex as a fledgling demon by its teachers. And Law One stated: "Thou shalt not lay palm upon thy victims."

It had never been told why this law pertained, but it did.

"Thou shalt not…"

So the whole painful process continued. Day in, day out, and still the man showed no sign of yielding. Over the next few weeks the Yattering killed two more cats that Polo brought home to replace his treasured Freddy (now ash).

The first of these poor victims was drowned in the toilet bowl one idle Friday afternoon. It was a pretty satisfaction to see the look of distaste register on Polo's face as he unzipped his fly and glanced down. But any pleasure the Yattering took in Jack's discomfiture was cancelled out by the blithely efficient way in which the man dealt with the dead cat, hoisting the bundle of soaking fur out of the pan, wrapping it in a towel and burying it in the back garden with scarcely a murmur.

The third cat that Polo brought home was wise to the invisible presence of the demon from the start. There was indeed an entertaining week in mid-November when life for the Yattering became almost interesting while it played cat and mouse with Freddy the Third. Freddy played the mouse. Cats not being especially bright animals the game was scarcely a great intellectual challenge, but it made a change from the endless days of waiting, haunting and failing. At least the creature accepted the Yattering's presence. Eventually, however, in a filthy mood (caused by the re-marriage of the Yattering's naked widow) the demon lost its temper with the cat. It was sharpening its nails on the nylon carpet, clawing and scratching at the pile for hours on end. The noise put the demon's metaphysical teeth on edge. It looked at the cat once, briefly, and it flew apart as though it had swallowed a live grenade. The effect was spectacular.

The results were gross. Cat-brain, cat-fur, cat-gut everywhere.

Polo got home that evening exhausted, and stood in the doorway of the dining-room, his face sickened, surveying the carnage that had been Freddy III.

"Damn dogs," he said. "Damn, damn dogs."

There was anger in his voice. Yes, exulted the Yattering, anger. The man was upset: there was clear evidence of emotion on his face.

Elated, the demon raced through the house, determined to capitalize on its victory. It opened and slammed every door. It smashed vases. It set the lampshades swinging.

Polo just cleaned up the cat.

The Yattering threw itself downstairs, tore up a pillow. Impersonated a thing with a limp and an appetite for human flesh in the attic, and giggling.

Polo just buried Freddy III, beside the grave of Freddy II, and the ashes of Freddy I.

Then he retired to bed, without his pillow.

The demon was utterly stumped. If the man could not raise more than a flicker of concern when his cat was exploded in the dining-room, what chance had it got of ever breaking the bastard?

There was one last opportunity left.

It was approaching Christ's Mass, and Jack's children would be coming home to the bosom of the family. Perhaps they could convince him that all was not well with the world; perhaps they could get their fingernails under his flawless indifference, and begin to break him down. Hoping against hope, the Yattering sat out the weeks to late December, planning its attacks with all the imaginative malice it could muster.

Meanwhile, Jack's life sauntered on. He seemed to live apart from his experience, living his life as an author might write a preposterous story, never involving himself in the narrative too deeply. In several significant ways, however, he showed his enthusiasm for the coming holiday. He cleared his daughters' rooms immaculately. He made their beds up with sweet-smelling linen. He cleaned every speck of cat's

blood out of the carpet. He even set up a Christmas tree in the lounge, hung with iridescent balls, tinsel and presents.

Once in a while, as he went about the preparations, Jack thought of the game he was playing, and quietly calculated the odds against him. In the days to come he would have to measure not only his own suffering, but that of his daughters, against the possible victory. And always, when he made these calculations, the chance of victory seemed to outweigh the risks.

So he continued to write his life, and waited.

Snow came, soft pats of it against the windows, against the door. Children arrived to sing carols, and he was generous to them. It was possible, for a brief time, to believe in peace on earth.

Late in the evening of the twenty-third of December the daughters arrived, in a flurry of cases and kisses. The youngest, Amanda, arrived home first. From its vantage point on the landing the Yattering viewed the young woman balefully. She didn't look like ideal material in which to induce a breakdown. In fact, she looked dangerous. Gina followed an hour or two later; a smoothly-polished woman of the world at twenty-four, she looked every bit as intimidating as her sister. They came into the house with their bustle and their laughter; they re-arranged the furniture; they threw out the junk-food in the freezer, they told each other (and their father) how much they had missed each other's company. Within the space of a few hours the drab house was repainted with light, and fun and love.

It made the Yattering sick.

Whimpering, it hid its head in the bedroom to block out the din of affection, but the shock-waves enveloped it. All it could do was sit, and listen, and refine its revenge.

Jack was pleased to have his beauties home. Amanda so full of opinions, and so strong, like her mother. Gina more like his mother: poised, perceptive. He was so happy in their presence he could have wept; and here was he, the proud father, putting them both at such risk. But what was the alternative? If he had cancelled the Christmas celebrations, it would have looked highly suspicious. It might even have spoiled his whole strategy, waking the enemy to the trick that was being played.

No; he must sit tight. Play dumb, the way the enemy had come to expect him to be.

The time would come for action.

At 3:15 a.m. on Christmas morning the Yattering opened hostilities by throwing Amanda out of bed. A paltry performance at best, but it had the intended effect. Sleepily rubbing her bruised head, she climbed back into bed, only to have the bed buck and shake and fling her off again like an unbroken colt.

The noise woke the rest of the house. Gina was first in her sister's room.

"What's going on?"

"There's somebody under the bed."

"What?"

Gina picked up a paperweight from the dresser and demanded the assailant come out. The Yattering, invisible, sat on the window seat and made obscene gestures at the women, tying knots in its genitalia.

Gina peered under the bed. The Yattering was clinging to the light fixture now, persuading it to swing backwards and forwards, making the room reel.

"There's nothing there -”

"There is."

Amanda knew. Oh yes, she knew.

"There's something here, Gina," she said. "Something in the room with us, I'm sure of it."

"No." Gina was absolute. "It's empty."

Amanda was searching behind the wardrobe when Polo came in.

"What's all the din?"

"There's something in the house Daddy. I was thrown out of bed."

Jack looked at the crumpled sheets, the dislodged mattress, then at Amanda. This was the first test: he must lie as casually as possible.

"Looks like you've been having nightmares, beauty," he said, affecting an innocent smile.

"There was something under the bed," Amanda insisted.

"There's nobody here now."

"But I felt it."

"Well, I'll check the rest of the house," he offered, without enthusiasm for the task. "You two stay here, just in case." As Polo left the room, the Yattering rocked the light a little more.

"Subsidence," said Gina.

It was cold downstairs, and Polo could have done without padding around barefoot on the kitchen tiles, but he was quietly satisfied that the battle had been joined in such a petty manner. He'd half-feared that the enemy would turn savage with such tender victims at hand. But no: he'd judged the mind of the creature quite accurately. It was one of the lower orders. Powerful, but slow. Capable of being inveigled beyond the limits of its control. Carefully does it, he told himself, carefully does it.

He traipsed through the entire house, dutifully opening cupboards and peering behind the furniture, then returned to his daughters, who were sitting at the top of the stairs. Amanda looked small and pale, not the twenty-two-year-old woman she was, but a child again.

"Nothing doing," he told her with a smile. "It's Christmas morning and all through the house -" Gina finished the rhyme.

"Nothing is stirring; not even a mouse."

"Not even a mouse, beauty."

At that moment the Yattering took its cue to fling a vase off the lounge mantelpiece.

Even Jack jumped.

"Shit," he said. He needed some sleep, but quite clearly the Yattering had no intention of letting them alone just yet. "Che sera, sera," he murmured, scooping up the pieces of the Chinese vase, and putting them in a piece of newspaper. "The house is sinking a little on the left side, you know," he said more loudly. "It has been for years." "Subsidence," said Amanda with quiet certainty, "would not throw me out of my bed."

Gina said nothing. The options were limited. The alternatives unattractive.

"Well, maybe it was Santa Claus," said Polo, attempting levity.

He parceled up the pieces of the vase and wandered through into the kitchen, certain that he was being shadowed every step of the way. "What else can it be?" He threw the question over his shoulder as he stuffed the newspaper into the waste bin. "The only other explanation-" here he became almost elated by his skimming so close to the truth, "the only other possible explanation is too preposterous for words."

It was an exquisite irony, denying the existence of the invisible world in the full knowledge that even now it breathed vengefully down his neck.

"You mean poltergeists?" said Gina.

"I mean anything that goes bang in the night. But, we're grown-up people aren't we? We don't believe in Bogeymen."

"No," said Gina flatly, "I don't, but I don't believe the house is subsiding either."

"Well, it'll have to do for now," said Jack with nonchalant finality. "Christmas starts here. We don't want to spoil it talking about gremlins, now do we."

They laughed together.

Gremlins. That surely bit deep. To call the Hell-spawn a gremlin.

The Yattering, weak with frustration, acid tears boiling on its intangible cheeks, ground its teeth and kept its peace. There would be time yet to beat that atheistic smile off Jack Polo's smooth, fat face. Time aplenty. No half-measures from now on. No subtlety. It would be an all out attack.

Let there be blood. Let there be agony. They'd all break.

Amanda was in the kitchen, preparing Christmas dinner, when the Yattering mounted its next attack. Through the house drifted the sound of King's College Choir,"0 Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie…" The presents had been opened, the G and T 's were being downed, the house was one warm embrace from roof to cellar.

In the kitchen a sudden chill permeated the heat and the steam, making Amanda shiver; she crossed to the window, which was ajar to clear the air, and closed it. Maybe she was catching something.

The Yattering watched her back as she busied herself about the kitchen, enjoying the domesticity for a day. Amanda felt the stare quite clearly. She turned round. Nobody, nothing. She continued to wash the Brussels sprouts, cutting into one with a worm curled in the middle. She drowned it.

The Choir sang on.

In the lounge, Jack was laughing with Gina about something.

Then, a noise. A rattling at first, followed by a beating of somebody's fists against a door. Amanda dropped the knife into the bowl of sprouts, and turned from the sink, following the sound. It was getting louder all the time. Like something locked in one of the cupboards, desperate to escape. A cat caught in the box, or a Bird. It was coming from the oven.

Amanda's stomach turned, as she began to imagine the worst.

Had she locked something in the oven when she'd put in the turkey? She called for her father, as she snatched up the oven cloth and stepped towards the cooker, which was rocking with the panic of its prisoner. She had visions of a basted cat leaping out at her, its fur burned off, its flesh half-cooked.

Jack was at the kitchen door.

"There's something in the oven," she said to him, as though he needed telling. The cooker was in a frenzy; its thrashing contents had all but beaten off the door.

He took the oven cloth from her. This is a new one, he thought. You're better than I judged you to be. This is clever. This is original.

Gina was in the kitchen now.

"What's cooking?" she quipped.

But the joke was lost as the cooker began to dance, and the pans of boiling water were twitched off the burners on to the floor. Scalding water seared Jack's leg. He yelled, stumbling back into Gina, before diving at the cooker with a yell that wouldn't have shamed a Samurai.

The oven handle was slippery with heat and grease, but he seized it and flung the door down.

A wave of steam and blistering heat rolled out of the oven, smelling of succulent turkey-fat. But the bird inside had apparently no intentions of being eaten. It was flinging itself from side to side on the roasting tray, tossing gouts of gravy in all directions. Its crisp brown wings pitifully flailed and flapped, its legs beat a tattoo on the roof of the oven.

Then it seemed to sense the open door. Its wings stretched themselves out to either side of its stuffed bulk and it half hopped, half fell on to the oven door, in a mockery of its living self. Headless, oozing stuffing and onions, it flopped around as though nobody had told the damn thing it was dead, while the fat still bubbled on its bacon-strewn back. Amanda screamed.

Jack dived for the door as the bird lurched into the air, blind but vengeful. What it intended to do once it reached its three cowering victims was never discovered. Gina dragged Amanda into the hallway with her father in hot pursuit, and the door was slammed closed as the blind bird flung itself against the paneling, beating on it with all its strength. Gravy seeped through the gap at the bottom of the door, dark and fatty.

The door had no lock, but Jack reasoned that the bird was not capable of turning the handle. As he backed away, breathless, he cursed his confidence. The opposition had more up its sleeve than he'd guessed. Amanda was leaning against the wall sobbing, her face stained with splotches of turkey grease. All she seemed able to do was deny what she'd seen, shaking her head and repeating the word 'no' like a talisman against the ridiculous horror that was still throwing itself against the door. Jack escorted her through to the lounge. The radio was still crooning carols which blotted out the din of the bird, but their promises of goodwill seemed small comfort. Gina poured a hefty brandy for her sister and sat beside her on the sofa, plying her with spirits and reassurance in about equal measure. They made little impression on Amanda.

"What was that?" Gina asked her father, in a tone that demanded an answer.

"I don't know what it was," Jack replied.

"Mass hysteria?" Gina's displeasure was plain. Her father had a

secret: he knew what was going on in the house, but he was refusing to cough up for some reason.

"What do I call: the police or an exorcist?"

"Neither."

"For God's sake -”

"There's nothing going on, Gina. Really."

Her father turned from the window and looked at her. His eyes spoke what his mouth refused to say, that this was war.

Jack was afraid.

The house was suddenly a prison. The game was suddenly lethal. The enemy, instead of playing foolish games, meant harm, real harm to them all.

In the kitchen the turkey had at last conceded defeat. The carols on the radio had withered into a sermon on God 's benedictions.

What had been sweet was sour and dangerous. He looked across the room at Amanda and Gina. Both for their own reasons, were trembling. Polo wanted to tell them, wanted to explain what was going on. But the thing must be there, he knew, gloating.

He was wrong. The Yattering had retired to the attic, well-satisfied with its endeavours. The bird, it felt, had been a stroke of genius. Now it could rest a while: recuperate. Let the enemy's nerves tatter themselves in anticipation. Then, in its own good time, it would deliver the coup de grace.

Idly, it wondered if any of the inspectors had seen his work with the turkey. Maybe they would be impressed enough by the Yattering's originality to improve its job prospects. Surely it hadn't gone through all those years of training simply to chase half-witted imbeciles like Polo. There must be something more challenging available than that. It felt victory in its invisible bones: and it was a good feeling.

The pursuit of Polo would surely gain momentum now. His daughters would convince him (if he wasn't now quite convinced) that there was something terrible afoot. He would crack. He would crumble. Maybe he'd go classically mad: tear out his hair, rip off his clothes; smear himself with his own excrement.

Oh yes, victory was close. And wouldn't his masters be loving then? Wouldn't it be showered with praise, and power?

One more manifestation was all that was required. One final, inspired intervention, and Polo would be so much blubbering flesh.

Tired, but confident, the Yattering descended into the lounge.

Amanda was lying full-length on the sofa, asleep. She was obviously dreaming about the turkey. Her eyes rolled beneath her gossamer lids, her lower lip trembled. Gina sat beside the radio, which was silenced now. She had a book open on her lap, but she wasn't reading it.

The gherkin importer wasn't in the room. Wasn't that his footstep on the stair? Yes, he was going upstairs to relieve his brandy-full bladder.

Ideal timing.

The Yattering crossed the room. In her sleep Amanda dreamt something dark flitting across her vision, something malign, something that tasted bitter in her mouth.

Gina looked up from her book.

The silver balls on the tree were rocking, gently. Not just the balls. The tinsel and the branches too. In fact, the tree. The whole tree was rocking as though someone had just seized hold of it.

Gina had a very bad feeling about this. She stood up. The book slid to the floor.

The tree began to spin. "Christ," she said. "Jesus Christ."

Amanda slept on.

The tree picked up momentum.

Gina walked as steadily as she could across to the sofa and tried to shake her sister awake. Amanda, locked in her dreams, resisted for a moment.

"Father," said Gina. Her voice was strong, and carried through into the hall. It also woke Amanda. Downstairs, Polo heard a noise like a whining dog. No, like two whining dogs. As he ran down the stairs, the duet became a trio. He burst into the lounge half expecting all the hosts of Hell to be in there, dog-headed, dancing on his beauties.

But no. It was the Christmas tree that was whining, whining like a pack of dogs, as it spun and spun. The lights had long since been pulled from their sockets. The air stank of singed plastic and pine-sap. The tree itself was spinning like a top, flinging decorations and presents off its tortured branches with the largesse of a mad king. Jack tore his eyes from the spectacle of the tree and found Gina and Amanda crouching, terrified, behind the sofa. "Get out of here," he yelled.

Even as he spoke the television sat up impertinently on one leg and began to spin like the tree, gathering momentum quickly. The clock on the mantelpiece joined the pirouetting. The pokers beside the fire. The cushions. The ornaments. Each object added its own singular note to the orchestration of whines which were building up, second by second, to a deafening pitch. The air began to brim with the smell of burning wood, as friction heated the spinning tops to flash-point. Smoke swirled across the room.

Gina had Amanda by the arm, and was dragging her towards the door, shielding her face against the hail of pine needles that the still-accelerating tree was throwing off.

Now the lights were spinning.

The books, having flung themselves off the shelves, had joined the tarantella.

Jack could see the enemy, in his mind's eye, racing between the objects like a juggler spinning plates on sticks, trying to keep them all moving at once. It must be exhausting work, he thought. The demon was probably close to collapse. It couldn't be thinking straight. Overexcited. Impulsive. Vulnerable. This must be the moment, if ever there was a moment, to join battle at last. To face the thing, defy it, and trap it.

For its part, the Yattering was enjoying this orgy of destruction. It flung every movable object into the fray, setting everything spinning.

It watched with satisfaction as the daughters twitched and scurried; it laughed to see the old man stare, pop-eyed, at this preposterous ballet.

Surely he was nearly mad, wasn't he?

The beauties had reached the door, their hair and skin full of needles. Polo didn't see them leave. He ran across the room, dodging a

rain of ornaments to do so, and picked up a brass toasting fork which the enemy had overlooked. Bric-a-brac filled the air around his head, dancing around with sickening speed. His flesh was bruised and punctured. But the exhilaration of joining battle had overtaken him, and he set about beating the books, and the clocks, and the china to smithereens. Like a man in a cloud of locusts he ran around the room, bringing down his favourite books in a welter of fluttering pages, smashing whirling Dresden, shattering the lamps. A litter of broken possessions swamped the floor, some of it still twitching as the life went out of the fragments. But for every object brought low, there were a dozen still spinning, still whining.

He could hear Gina at the door, yelling to him to get out, to leave it alone.

But it was so enjoyable, playing against the enemy more directly than he'd ever allowed himself before. He didn't want to give up. He wanted the demon to show itself, to be known, to be recognized.

He wanted confrontation with the Old One's emissary once and for all.

Without warning the tree gave way to the dictates of centrifugal force, and exploded. The noise was like a howl of death. Branches, twigs, needles, balls, lights, wire, ribbons, flew across the room. Jack, his back to the explosion, felt a gust of energy hit him hard, and he was flung to the ground. The back of his neck and his scalp were shot full of pine-needles. A branch, naked of greenery, shot past his head and impaled the sofa. Fragments of tree pattered to the carpet around him.

Now other objects around the room, spun beyond the tolerance of their structures, were exploding like the tree. The television blew up, sending a lethal wave of glass across the room, much of which buried itself in the opposite wall. Fragments of the television's innards, so hot they singed the skin, fell on Jack, as he elbowed himself towards the door like a soldier under bombardment.

The room was so thick with a barrage of shards it was like a fog. The cushions had lent their down to the scene, snowing on the carpet. Porcelain pieces: a beautifully-glazed arm, a courtesan's head, bounced on the floor in front of his nose.

Gina was crouching at the door, urging him to hurry, her eyes narrowed against the hail. As Jack reached the door, and felt her arms

around him, he swore he could hear laughter from the lounge. Tangible, audible laughter, rich and satisfied.

Amanda was standing in the hall, her hair full of pine-needles, staring down at him. He pulled his legs through the doorway and Gina slammed the door shut on the demolition.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Poltergeist? Ghost? Mother's ghost?"

The thought of his dead wife being responsible for such wholesale destruction struck Jack as funny. Amanda was half smiling. Good, he thought, she's coming out of it. Then he met the vacant look in her eyes and the truth dawned. She'd broken, her sanity had taken refuge where this fantastique couldn't get at it. "What's in there?" Gina was asking, her grip on his arm so strong it stopped the blood.

"I don't know," he lied. "Amanda?"

Amanda's smile didn't decay. She just stared on at him, through him.

"You do know."

"No."

"You're lying."

"I think…"

He picked himself off the floor, brushing the pieces of porcelain, the feathers, the glass, off his shirt and trousers. "I think… I shall go for a walk."

Behind him, in the lounge, the last vestiges of whining had stopped. The air in the hallway was electric with unseen presences. It was very close to him, invisible as ever, but so close. This was the most dangerous time. He mustn't lose his nerve now. He must stand up as though nothing had happened; he must leave Amanda be, leave explanations and recriminations until it was all over and done with.

"Walk?" Gina said, disbelievingly. "Yes… walk… I need some fresh air." "You can't leave us here." "I'll find somebody to help us clear up." "But Mandy."

"She'll get over it. Leave her be."

That was hard. That was almost unforgivable. But it was said now.

He walked unsteadily towards the front door, feeling nauseous after so much spinning. At his back Gina was raging. "You can't just leave! Are you out of your mind?"

"I need the air," he said, as casually as his thumping heart and his parched throat would permit. "So I'll just go out for a moment."

No, the Yattering said. No, no, no.

It was behind him, Polo could feel it. So angry now, so ready to twist off his head. Except that it wasn't allowed, ever to touch him. But he could feel its resentment like a physical presence.

He took another step towards the front door.

It was with him still, dogging his every step. His shadow, his fetch; unshakeable. Gina shrieked at him, "You son-of-a-bitch, look at Mandy! She's lost her mind!"

No, he mustn't look at Mandy. If he looked at Mandy he might weep, he might break down as the thing wanted him to, then everything would be lost.

"She'll be all right," he said, barely above a whisper. He reached for the front door handle. The demon bolted the door, quickly, loudly. No temper left for pretence now.

Jack, keeping his movements as even as possible, unbolted the door, top and bottom. It bolted again. It was thrilling, this game; it was also terrifying. If he pushed too far surely the demon's frustration would override its lessons?

Gently, smoothly, he unbolted the door again. Just as gently, just as smoothly, the Yattering bolted it. Jack wondered how long he could keep this up for. Somehow he had to get outside: he had to coax it over the threshold. One step was all that the law required, according to his researches.

One simple step.

Unbolted. Bolted. Unbolted. Bolted.

Gina was standing two or three yards behind her father. She didn't understand what she was seeing, but it was obvious her father was doing battle with someone, or something.

"Daddy -" she began.

"Shut up," he said benignly, grinning as he unbolted the door for the seventh time. There was a shiver of lunacy in the grin, it was too wide and too easy.

Inexplicably, she returned the smile. It was grim, but genuine. Whatever was at issue here, she loved him. Polo made a break for the back door. The demon was three paces ahead of him, scooting through the house like a sprinter, and bolting the door before Jack could even reach the handle. The key was turned in the lock by invisible hands, then crushed to dust in the air.

Jack feigned a move towards the window beside the back door but the blinds were pulled down and the shutters slammed. The Yattering, too concerned with the window to watch Jack closely, missed his doubling back through the house.

When it saw the trick that was being played it let out a little screech, and gave chase, almost sliding into Jack on the smoothly-polished floor. It avoided the collision only by the most balletic of maneuvers. That would be fatal indeed: to touch the man in the heat of the moment.

Polo was again at the front door and Gina, wise to her father's strategy, had unbolted it while the Yattering and Jack fought at the back door. Jack had prayed she'd take the opportunity to open it. She had. It stood slightly ajar: The icy air of the crisp afternoon curled its way into the hallway.

Jack covered the last yards to the door in a flash, feeling without hearing the howl of complaint the Yattering loosed as it saw its victim escaping into the outside world.

It was not an ambitious creature. All it wanted at that moment, beyond any other dream, was to take this human's skull between its palms and make a nonsense of it. Crush it to smithereens, and pour the hot thought out on to the snow. To be done with Jack J. Polo, forever and forever.

Was that so much to ask?

Polo had stepped into the squeaky-fresh snow, his slippers and trouser-bottoms buried in chill. By the time the fury reached the step Jack was already three or four yards away, marching up the path towards the gate. Escaping. Escaping.

The Yattering howled again, forgetting its years of training. Every lesson it had learned, every rule of battle engraved on its skull was submerged by the simple desire to have Polo's life.

It stepped over the threshold and gave chase. It was an unpardonable transgression. Somewhere in Hell, the powers (long may they hold court; long may they shit light on the heads of the damned) felt the sin, and knew the war for Jack Polo's soul was lost.

Jack felt it too. He heard the sound of boiling water, as the demon's footsteps melted to steam the snow on the path. It was coming after him! The thing had broken the first rule of its existence. It was forfeit. He felt the victory in his spine, and his stomach.

The demon overtook him at the gate. Its breath could clearly be seen in the air, though the body it emanated from had not yet become visible.

Jack tried to open the gate, but the Yanering slammed it shut.

"Che sera, sera," said Jack.

The Yattering could bear it no longer. He took Jack's head in his hands, intending to crush the fragile bone to dust. The touch was its second sin; and it agonized the Yattering beyond endurance. It bayed like a banshee and reeled away from the contact, sliding in the snow and falling on its back.

It knew its mistake. The lessons it had had beaten into it came hurtling back. It knew the punishment too, for leaving the house, for touching the man. It was bound to a new lord, enslaved to this idiot-creature standing over it. Polo had won.

He was laughing, watching the way the outline of the demon formed in the snow on the path. Like a photograph developing on a sheet of paper, the image of the fury came clear. The law was taking its toll. The Yattering could never hide from its master again. There it was, plain to Polo's eyes, in all its charmless glory. Maroon flesh and bright lidless eye, arms flailing, tail thrashing the snow to slush.

"You bastard," it said. Its accent had an Australian lilt.

"You will not speak unless spoken to," said Polo, with quiet, but absolute, authority. "Understood?" The lidless eye clouded with humility.

"Yes," the Yattering said.

"Yes, Mister Polo."

"Yes, Mister Polo."

Its tail slipped between its legs like that of a whipped dog.

"You may stand."

"Thank you, Mr. Polo."

It stood. Not a pleasant sight, but one Jack rejoiced in nevertheless. "They'll have you yet," said the Yattering.

"Who will?"

"You know," it said, hesitantly.

"Name them."

"Beelzebub," it answered, proud to name its old master. "The powers. Hell itself."

"I don't think so," Polo mused. "Not with you bound to me as proof of my skills. Aren't I the better of them?" The eye looked sullen.

"Aren't I?"

"Yes," it conceded bitterly. "Yes. You are the better of them."

It had begun to shiver.

"Are you cold?" asked Polo.

It nodded, affecting the look of a lost child.

"Then you need some exercise," he said. "You'd better go back into the house and start tidying up." The fury looked bewildered, even disappointed, by this instruction.

"Nothing more?" it asked incredulously. "No miracles? No Helen of Troy? No flying?"

The thought of flying on a snow-spattered afternoon like this left Polo cold. He was essentially a man of simple tastes: all he asked for in life was the love of his children, a pleasant home, and a good

trading price for gherkins. "No flying," he said.

As the Yattering slouched down the path towards the door it seemed to alight upon a new piece of mischief. It turned back to Polo, obsequious, but unmistakably smug.

"Could I just say something?" it said.

"Speak."

"It's only fair that I inform you that it's considered ungodly to have any contact with the likes of me. Heretical even." "Is that so?"

"Oh yes," said the Yattering, warming to its prophecy. "People have been burned for less."

"Not in this day and age," Polo replied.

"But the Seraphim will see," it said. "And that means you'll never go to that place."

"What place?"

The Yattering fumbled for the special word it had heard Beelzebub use.

"Heaven," it said, triumphant. An ugly grin had come on to its face; this was the cleverest maneuver it had ever attempted; it was juggling theology here.

Jack nodded slowly, nibbling at his bottom lip.

The creature was probably telling the truth: association with it or its like would not be looked upon benignly by the Host of Saints and Angels. He probably was forbidden access to the plains of paradise.

"Well," he said, "you know what I have to say about that, don't you?"

The Yattering stared at him, frowning. No, it didn't know. Then the grin of satisfaction it had been wearing died, as it saw just what Polo was driving at.

"What do I say?" Polo asked it.

Defeated, the Yattering murmured the phrase.

"Che sera, sera."

Polo smiled. "There's a chance for you yet," he said, and led the way over the threshold, closing the door with something very like serenity on his face.

IV: PIG BLOOD BLUES

You could smell the kids before you could see them, their young sweat turned stale in corridors with barred windows, their bolted breath sour, their heads musty. Then their voices, subdued by the rules of confinement. Don't run. Don't shout. Don't whistle. Don't fight.

They called it a Remand Centre for Adolescent Offenders, but it was near as damn it a prison. There were locks and keys and warders. The gestures of liberalism were few and far between and they didn't disguise the truth too well; Tetherdowne was a prison by sweeter name, and the inmates knew it.

Not that Redman had any illusions about his pupils-to-be. They were hard, and they were locked away for a reason. Most of them would rob you blind as soon as look at you; cripple you if it suited them, no sweat. He had too many years in the force to believe the sociological lie. He knew the victims, and he knew the kids. They weren't misunderstood morons, they were quick and sharp and amoral, like the razors they hid under their tongues. They had no use for sentiment, they just wanted out.

"Welcome to Tetherdowne."

Was the woman's name Leverton, or Leverfall, or -”I'm Doctor Leverthal."

Leverthal. Yes. Hard-bitten bitch he'd met at -”We met at the interview."

"Yes."

"We're glad to see you, Mr. Redman."

"Neil; please call me Neil."

"We try not to go on a first name basis in front of the boys, we find they think they've got a finger into your private life. So I'd prefer you to keep Christian names purely for off-duty hours."

She didn't offer hers. Probably something flinty.

Yvonne. Lydia. He'd invent something appropriate.

She looked fifty, and was probably ten years younger.

No make-up, hair tied back so severely he wondered her eyes didn't pop.

"You'll be beginning classes the day after tomorrow. The Governor asked me to welcome you to the Centre on his behalf, and apologize to you that he can't be here himself. There are funding problems."

"Aren't there always?"

"Regrettably yes. I'm afraid we're swimming against the tide here; the general mood of the country is very Law and Order orientated."

What was that a nice way of saying? Beat the shit out of any kid caught so much as jay-walking? Yes, he'd been that way himself in his time, and it was a nasty little cul-de-sac, every bit as bad as being sentimental. "The fact is, we may lose Tetherdowne altogether," she said, “which would be a shame. I know it doesn't look like much…"

"- but it's home," he laughed. The joke fell among thieves. She didn't even seem to hear it.

"You," her tone hardened, “you have a solid (did she say sullied?) background in the Police Force. Our hope is that your appointment here will be welcomed by the funding authorities."

So that was it. Token ex-policeman brought in to appease the powers that be, to show willing in the discipline department. They didn't really want him here. They wanted some sociologist who'd write up reports on the effect of the class-system on brutality amongst teenagers. She was quietly telling him that he was the odd man out. "I told you why I left the force."

"You mentioned it. Invalided out."

"I wouldn't take a desk job, it was as simple as that; and they wouldn't let me do what I did best. Danger to myself according to some of them."

She seemed a little embarrassed by his explanation. Her a psychologist too; she should have been devouring this stuff, it was his private hurt he was making public here. He was coming clean, for Christ's sake. "So I was out on my backside, after twenty-four years." He hesitated, then said his piece. "I'm not a token policeman; I'm not any kind of policeman. The force and I parted company. Understand what I'm saying?" "Good, good." She didn't understand a bloody word. He tried another approach.

"I'd like to know what the boys have been told."

"Been told?"

"About me."

"Well, something of your background."

"I see." They'd been warned. Here come the pigs.

"It seemed important."

He grunted.

"You see, so many of these boys have real aggression problems. That's a source of difficulty for so very many of them. They can't control themselves, and consequently they suffer."

He didn't argue, but she looked at him severely, as though he had.

"Oh yes, they suffer. That's why we're at such pains to show some appreciation of their situation; to teach them that there are alternatives."

She walked across to the window. From the second storey there was an adequate view of the grounds. Tetherdowne had been some kind of estate, and there was a good deal of land attached to the main house. A playing-field, its grass sere in the midsummer drought. Beyond it a cluster of out-houses, some exhausted trees, shrubbery, and then rough wasteland off to the wall. He'd seen the wall from the other side. Alcatraz would have been proud of it. "We try to give them a little freedom, a little education and a little sympathy. There's a popular notion, isn't there, that delinquents enjoy their criminal activities? This isn't my experience at all. They come to me guilty, broken… One broken victim flicked a vee at Leverthal's back as he sauntered along the corridor. Hair slicked down and parted in three places. A couple of home-grown tattoos on his fore-arm, unfinished.

"They have committed criminal acts, however," Redman pointed out.

"Yes, but -" "And must, presumably, be reminded of the fact."

"I don't think they need any reminding, Mr. Redman. I think they burn with guilt."

She was hot on guilt, which didn't surprise him. They'd taken over

the pulpit, these analysts. They were up where the Bible-thumpers used to stand, with the threadbare sermons on the fires below, but with a slightly less colourful vocabulary. It was fundamentally the same story though, complete with the promises of healing, if the rituals were observed. And behold, the righteous shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

There was a pursuit on the playing field, he noticed. Pursuit, and now a capture. One victim was laying into another smaller victim with his boot; it was a fairly merciless display.

Leverthal caught the scene at the same time as Redman.

"Excuse me. I must -”

She started down the stairs.

"Your workshop is third door on the left if you want to take a look," she called over her shoulder, "I'll be right back." Like hell she would. Judging by the way the scene on the field was progressing, it would be a three crowbar job to prize them apart.

Redman wandered along to his workshop. The door was locked, but through the wired glass he could see the benches, the vices, the tools. Not bad at all. He might even teach them some wood-work, if he was left alone long enough to do it.

A bit frustrated not to be able to get in, he doubled back along the corridor, and followed Leverthal downstairs, finding his way out easily on to the sun-lit playing field. A little knot of spectators had grown around the fight, or the massacre, which had now ceased. Leverthal was standing, staring down at the boy on the ground. One of the warders was kneeling at the boy's head; the injuries looked bad.

A number of the spectators looked up and stared at the new face as Redman approached. There were whispers amongst them, some smiles.

Redman looked at the boy. Perhaps sixteen, he lay with his cheek to the ground, as if listening for something in the earth.

"Lacey', Leverthal named the boy for Redman.

"Is he badly hurt?"

The man kneeling beside Lacey shook his head.

"Not too bad. Bit of a fall. Nothing broken."

There was blood on the boy's face from his mashed nose. His eyes were closed. Peaceful. He could have been dead. "Where's the bloody stretcher?" said the warder. He was clearly uncomfortable on the drought-hardened ground. "They're coming, Sir," said someone. Redman thought it was the aggressor. A thin lad: about nineteen. The sort of eyes that could sour milk at twenty paces.

Indeed a small posse of boys was emerging from the main building, carrying a stretcher and a red blanket. They were all grinning from ear to ear.

The band of spectators had begun to disperse, now that the best of it was over. Not much fun picking up the pieces. "Wait, wait," said Redman, “don't we need some witnesses here? Who did this?"

There were a few casual shrugs, but most of them played deaf. They sauntered away as if nothing had been said. Redman said: "We saw it. From the window."

Leverthal was offering no support.

"Didn't we?" he demanded of her.

"It was too far to lay any blame, I think. But I don't want to see any more of this kind of bullying, do you all understand me?"

She'd seen Lacey, and recognized him easily from that distance. Why not the attacker too? Redman kicked himself for not concentrating; without names and personalities to go with the faces, it was difficult to distinguish between them. The risk of making a misplaced accusation was high, even though he was almost sure of the curdling eyed boy. This was no time to make mistakes, he decided; this time he'd have to let the issue drop.

Leverthal seemed unmoved by the whole thing.

"Lacey," she said quietly, “it's always Lacey."

"He asks for it," said one of the boys with the stretcher, brushing a sheaf of blond-white hair from his eyes, “he doesn't know no better."

Ignoring the observation, Leverthal supervised Lacey's transfer to the stretcher, and started to walk back to the main building, with Redman in tow. It was all so casual.

"Not exactly wholesome, Lacey," she said cryptically, almost by way of explanation; and that was all. So much for compassion.

Redman glanced back as they tucked the red blanket around Lacey's still form. Two things happened, almost simultaneously.

The first: Somebody in the group said, "That's the pig'. The second: Lacey's eyes opened and looked straight into Redman's, wide, clear and true.

Redman spent a good deal of the next day putting his workshop in order. Many of the tools had been broken or rendered useless by untrained handling: saws without teeth, chisels that were chipped and edgeless, broken vices. He'd need money to re-supply the shop with the basics of the trade, but now wasn't the time to start asking. Wiser to wait, and be seen to do a decent job. He was quite used to the politics of institutions; the force was full of it. About four-thirty a bell started to ring, a good way from the workshop. He ignored it, but after a time his instincts got the better of him. Bells were alarms, and alarms were sounded to alert people. He left his tidying, locked the workshop door behind him, and followed his ears.

The bell was ringing in what was laughingly called the Hospital Unit, two or three rooms closed off from the main block and prettied up with a few pictures and curtains at the windows. There was no sign of smoke in the air, so it clearly wasn't a fire. There was shouting though. M ore than shouting. A howl.

He quickened his pace along the interminable corridors, and as he turned a corner towards the Unit a small figure ran straight into him. The impact winded both of them, but Redman grabbed the lad by the arm before he could make off again. The captive was quick to respond, lashing out with his shoeless feet against Redman's shin. But he had him fast.

"Let me go you fucking -”

"Calm down! Calm down!"

His pursuers were almost there. "Hold him!"

"Fucker! Fucker! Fucker! Fucker!"

"Hold him!"

It was like wrestling a crocodile: the kid had all the strength of fear.

But the best of his fury was spent. Tears were springing into his bruised eyes as he spat in Redman's face. It was Lacey in his arms, unwholesome Lacey.

"OK. We got him."

Redman stepped back as the warder took over, putting Lacey in a hold that looked fit to break the boy's arm. Two or three others were appearing round the corner. Two boys, and a nurse, a very unlovely creature. "Let me go… Let me go…" Lacey was yelling, but any stomach for the fight had gone out of him. A pout came to his face in defeat, and still the cow-like eyes turned up accusingly at Redman, big and brown. He looked younger than his sixteen years, almost prepubescent. There was a whisper of bum-fluff on his cheek and a few spots amongst the bruises and a badly-applied dressing across his nose. But quite a girlish face, a virgin's face, from an age when there were still virgins. And still the eyes.

Leverthal had appeared, too late to be of use.

"What's going on?"

The warder piped up. The chase had taken his breath, and his temper.

"He locked himself in the lavatories. Tried to get out through the window."

"Why?"

The question was addressed to the warder, not to the child. A telling confusion. The warder, confounded, shrugged. "Why?" Redman repeated the question to Lacey. The boy just stared, as though he'd never been asked a question before.

"You the pig?" he said suddenly, snot running from his nose.

"Pig?"

"He means policeman," said one of the boys. The noun was spoken with a mocking precision, as though he was addressing an imbecile.

"I know what he means, lad," said Redman, still determined to out-stare Lacey, "I know very well what he means." "Are you?"

"Be quiet, Lacey," said Leverthal, "you're in enough trouble as it is."

"Yes, son. I'm the pig."

The war of looks went on, a private battle between boy and man.

"You don't know nothing," said Lacey. It wasn't a snide remark, the boy was simply telling his version of the truth; his gaze didn't flicker.

"All right, Lacey, that's enough." The warder was trying to haul him away; his belly stuck out between pajama top and bottom, a smooth dome of milk skin.

"Let him speak," said Redman. "What don't I know?"

"He can give his side of the story to the Governor," said Leverthal before Lacey could reply. "It's not your concern."

But it was very much his concern. The stare made it his concern; so cutting, so damned. The stare demanded that it become his concern.

"Let him speak," said Redman, the authority in his voice overriding Leverthal. The warder loosened his hold just a little.

"Why did you try and escape, Lacey?"

"Cause he came back."

"Who came back? A name, Lacey. Who are you talking about?"

For several seconds Redman sensed the boy fighting a pact with silence; then Lacey shook his head, breaking the electric exchange between them. He seemed to lose his way somewhere; a kind of puzzlement gagged him. "No harm's going to come to you."

Lacey stared at his feet, frowning. "I want to go back to bed now," he said. A virgin's request. "No harm, Lacey. I promise."

The promise seemed to have precious little effect; Lacey was struck dumb. But it was a promise nevertheless, and he hoped Lacey realized that. The kid looked exhausted by the effort of his failed escape, of the pursuit, of staring. His face was ashen. He let the warder turn him and take him back. Before he rounded the corner again, he seemed to change his mind; he struggled to loose himself, failed, but managed to twist himself round to face his interrogator. "Henessey," he said, meeting Redman's eyes once more. That was all. He was shunted out of sight before he could say anything more.

"Henessey?" said Redman, feeling like a stranger suddenly.

"Who's Henessey?"

Leverthal was lighting a cigarette. Her hands were shaking ever so slightly as she did it. He hadn't noticed that yesterday, but he wasn't surprised. He'd yet to meet a head shrinker who didn't have problems of their own.

"The boy's lying," she said, "Henessey's no longer with us."

A little pause. Redman didn't prompt, it would only make her jumpy.

"Lacey's clever," she went on, putting the cigarette to her colourless lips. "He knows just the spot." "Eh?"

"You're new here, and he wants to give you the impression that he's got a mystery all of his own." "It isn't a mystery then?"

"Henessey?" she snorted. "Good God no. He escaped custody in early May. He and Lacey…" She hesitated, without wanting to. "He and Lacey had something between them. Drugs perhaps, we never found out. Glue-sniffing, mutual masturbation, God knows what."

She really did find the whole subject unpleasant. Distaste was written over her face in a dozen tight places. "How did Henessey escape?"

"We still don't know," she said. "He just didn't turn up for roll-call one morning. The place was searched from top to bottom. But he'd gone."

"Is it possible he'd come back?"

A genuine laugh.

"Jesus no. He hated the place. Besides, how could he get in?"

"He got out."

Leverthal conceded the point with a murmur. "He wasn't especially bright, but he was cunning. I wasn't altogether surprised when he went missing. The few weeks before his escape he'd really sunk into himself. I couldn't get anything out of him, and up until then he'd been quite talkative."

"And Lacey?"

"Under his thumb. It often happens. Younger boy idolizes an older, more experienced individual. Lacey had a very unsettled family background."

Neat, thought Redman. So neat he didn't believe a word of it. Minds weren't pictures at an exhibition, all numbered, and hung in order of influence, one marked "Cunning', the next, "Impressionable'. They were scrawls; they were sprawling splashes of graffiti, unpredictable, unconfinable.

And little boy Lacey? He was written on water.

Classes began the next day, in a heat so oppressive it turned the workshop into an oven by eleven. But the boys responded quickly to Redman's straight dealing. They recognized in him a man they could respect without liking. They expected no favours, and received none. It was a stable arrangement.

Redman found the staff on the whole less communicative than the boys. An odd-ball bunch, all in all. Not a strong heart amongst them he decided. The routine of Tetherdowne, its rituals of classification, of humiliation, seemed to grind them into a common gravel. Increasingly he found himself avoiding conversation with his peers. The workshop became a sanctuary, a home from home, smelling of newly cut wood and bodies.

It was not until the following Monday that one of the boys mentioned the farm.

Nobody had told him there was a farm in the grounds of the Centre, and the idea struck Redman as absurd. "Nobody much goes down there," said Creeley, one of the worst woodworkers on God's earth. "It stinks." General laughter.

"All right, lads, settle down."

The laughter subsided, laced with a few whispered jibes.

"Where is this farm, Creeley?"

"It's not even a farm really, sir," said Creeley, chewing his tongue (an incessant routine). "It's just a few huts. Stink, they do sir. Especially now."

He pointed out of the window to the wilderness beyond the playing field. Since he'd last looked out at the sight, that first day with

Leverthal, the wasteland had ripened in the sweaty heat, ranker with weeds than ever. Creeley pointed out a distant brick wall, all but hidden behind a shield of shrubs.

"See it, sir?"

"Yes, I see it."

"That's the sty, sir."

Another round of sniggers.

"What's so funny?" he wheeled on the class. A dozen heads snapped down to their work.

"I wouldn't go down there sir. It's high as a fucking kite."

Creeley wasn't exaggerating. Even in the relative cool of the late afternoon the smell wafting off the farm was stomach turning. Redman just followed his nose across the field and past the out-houses. The buildings he glimpsed from the workshop window were coming out of hiding. A few ramshackle huts thrown up out of corrugated iron and rotting wood, a chicken run, and the brick-built sty were all the farm could offer. As Creeley had said, it wasn't really a farm at all. It was a tiny domesticated Dachau; filthy and forlorn. Somebody obviously fed the few prisoners: the hens, the half dozen geese, the pigs, but nobody seemed bothered to clean them out. Hence that rotten smell. The pigs particularly were living in a bed of their own ordure, islands of dung cooked to perfection in the sun, peopled with thousands of flies.

The sty itself was divided into two separate compartments, divided by a high brick wall. In the forecourt of one a small, mottled pig lay on its side in the filth, its flank alive with ticks and bugs. Another, smaller, pig could be glimpsed in the gloom of the interior, lying on shit-thick straw. Neither showed any interest in Redman.

The other compartment seemed empty.

There was no excrement in the forecourt, and far fewer flies amongst the straw. The accumulated smell of old fecal matter was no less acute, however, and Redman was about to turn away when there was a noise from inside, and a great bulk righted itself. He leaned over the padlocked wooden gate, blotting out the stench by an act of will, and peered through the doorway of the sty.

The pig came out to look at him. It was three times the size of its companions, a vast sow that might well have mothered the pigs in the adjacent pen. But where her farrows were filthy-flanked, the sow was pristine, her blushing pink frame radiant with good health. Her sheer size impressed Redman. She must have weighed twice what he weighed, he guessed: an altogether formidable creature. A glamorous animal in her gross way, with her curling blonde lashes and the delicate down on her shiny snout that coarsened to bristles around her lolling ears, and the oily, fetching look in her dark brown eyes.

Redman, a city boy, had seldom seen the living truth behind, or previous to, the meat on his plate. This wonderful porker came as a revelation. The bad press that he'd always believed about pigs, the reputation that made the very name a synonym for foulness, all that was given the lie.

The sow was beautiful, from her snuffling snout to the delicate corkscrew of her tail, a seductress on trotters. Her eyes regarded Redman as an equal, he had no doubt of that, admiring him rather less than he admired her. She was safe in her head, he in his. They were equal under a glittering sky.

Close to, her body smelt sweet. Somebody had clearly been there that very morning, sluicing her down, and feeding her. Her trough, Redman now noticed, still brimmed with a mush of slops, the remains of yesterday's meal. She hadn't touched it; she was no glutton.

Soon she seemed to have the sum of him, and grunting quietly she turned around on her nimble feet and returned to the cool of the interior. The audience was over.

That night he went to find Lacey. The boy had been removed from the Hospital Unit and put in a shabby room of his own. He was apparently still being bullied by the other boys in his dormitory, and the alternative was this solitary confinement. Redman found him sitting on a carpet of old comic books, staring at the wall. The lurid covers of the comics made his face look milkier than ever. The bandage had gone from his nose, and the bruise on the bridge was yellowing.

He shook Lacey's hand, and the boy gazed up at him. There was a real turn about since their last meeting. Lacey was calm, even docile. The handshake, a ritual Redman had introduced whenever he met boys out of the workshop, was weak.

"Are you well?"

The boy nodded.

"Do you like being alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll have to go back to the dormitory eventually." Lacey shook his head.

"You can't stay here forever, you know."

"Oh, I know that, sir."

"You'll have to go back."

Lacey nodded. Somehow the logic didn't seem to have got through to the boy. He turned up the corner of a Superman comic and stared at the splash-page without scanning it.

"Listen to me, Lacey. I want you and I to understand each other. Yes?"

"Yes, sir." Lacey seemed unruffled by this conflict of opinion. "You'll see," he said simply. "You'll see."

"I can't help you if you lie to me. Can I?"

"No."

"Why did you mention Kevin Henessey's name to me last week? I know that he isn't here any longer. He escaped, didn't he?"

Lacey stared at the three-colour hero on the page.

"Didn't he?"

"He's here," said Lacey, very quietly. The kid was suddenly distraught. It was in his voice, and in the way his face folded up on itself.

"If he escaped, why should he come back? That doesn't really make much sense to me, does it make much sense to you?"

Lacey shook his head. There were tears in his nose, that muffled his words, but they were clear enough. "He never went away."

"What? You mean he never escaped?"

"He's clever sir. You don't know Kevin. He's clever." He closed the comic, and looked up at Redman. "In what way clever?"

"He planned everything, sir. All of it."

"You have to be clear."

"You won't believe me. Then that's the end, because you won't believe me. He hears you know, he's everywhere. He doesn't care about walls. Dead people don't care about nothing like that."

Dead. A smaller word than alive; but it took the breath away.

"He can come and go," said Lacey, "any time he wants."

"Are you saying Henessey is dead?" said Redman. "Be careful, Lacey."

The boy hesitated: he was aware that he was walking a tight rope, very close to losing his protector. "You promised," he said suddenly, cold as ice.

"Promised no harm would come to you. It won't. I said that and I meant it. But that doesn't mean you can tell me lies, Lacey."

"What lies, sir?"

"Henessey isn't dead."

"He is, sir. They all know he is. He hanged himself. With the pigs."

Redman had been lied to many times, by experts, and he felt he'd become a good judge of liars. He knew all the telltale signs. But the boy exhibited none of them. He was telling the truth. Redman felt it in his bones. The truth; the whole truth; nothing but.

That didn't mean that what the boy was saying was true. He was simply telling the truth as he understood it. He believed Henessey was deceased. That proved nothing.

"If Henessey were dead -"

"He is, sir."

"If he were, how could he be here?"

The boy looked at Redman without a trace of guile in his face.

"Don't you believe in ghosts, sir?"

So transparent a solution, it flummoxed Redman. Henessey was dead, yet Henessey was here. Hence, Henessey was a ghost.

"Don't you, sir?"

The boy wasn't asking a rhetorical question. He wanted, no, he demanded, a reasonable answer to his reasonable question.

"No, boy," said Redman. "No, I don't."

In the sty at the perimeter of the grounds the great, nameless sow was hungry.

She judged the rhythm of the days, and with their progression her desires grew. She knew that the time for stale slops in a trough was past. Other appetites had taken the place of those piggy pleasures.

She had a taste, since the first time, for food with a certain texture, a certain resonance. It wasn't food she would demand all the time, only when the need came on her. Not a great demand: once in a while, to gobble at the hand that fed her.

She stood at the gate of her prison, listless with anticipation, waiting and waiting. She snaffled, she snorted, her impatience becoming a dull anger. In the adjacent pen her castrated sons, sensing her distress, became agitated in their turn. They knew her nature, and it was dangerous. She had, after all, eaten two of their brothers, living, fresh and wet from her own womb.

Then there were noises through the blue veil of twilight, the soft brushing sound of passage through the nettles, accompanied by the murmur of voices.

Two boys were approaching the sty, respect and caution in every step. She made them nervous, and understandably so. The tales of her tricks were legion.

Didn't she speak, when angered, in that possessed voice, bending her fat, porky mouth to talk with a stolen tongue? Wouldn't she stand on her back trotters sometimes, pink and imperial, and demand that the smallest boys be sent into her shadow to suckle her, naked like her farrow? And wouldn't she beat her vicious heels upon the ground,

until the food they brought for her was cut into petit pieces and delivered into her maw between trembling finger and thumb? All these things she did.

And worse.

Tonight, the boys knew, they had not brought what she wanted. It was not the meat she was due that lay on the plate they carried. Not the sweet, white meat that she had asked for in that other voice of hers, the meat she could, if she desired, take by force. Tonight the meal was simply stale bacon, filched from the kitchens. The nourishment she really craved, the meat that had been pursued and terrified to engorge the muscle, then bruised like a hammered steak for her delectation, that meat was under special protection. It would take a while to coax it to the slaughter. Meanwhile they hoped she would accept their apologies and their tears, and not devour them in her anger. One of the boys had shit his pants by the time he reached the sty-wall, and the sow smelt him. Her voice took on a different timbre, enjoying the piquancy of their fear.

Instead of the low snort there was a higher, hotter note out of her. It said: I know, I know. Come and be judged. I know, I know.

She watched them through the slats of the gate, her eyes glinting like jewels in the murky night, brighter than the night because living, purer than the night because wanting.

The boys knelt at the gate, their heads bowed in supplication, the plate they both held lightly covered with a piece of stained muslin.

"Well?" she said. The voice was unmistakable in their ears. His voice, out of the mouth of the pig. The elder boy, a black kid with a cleft palate, spoke quietly to the shining eyes, making the best of his fear: "It's not what you wanted. We're sorry."

The other boy, uncomfortable in his crowded trousers, murmured his apology too.

"We'll get him for you though. We will, really. We'll bring him to you very soon, as soon as we possibly can." "Why not tonight?" said the pig.

"He's being protected."

"A new teacher. Mr. Redman."

The sow seemed to know it all already. She remembered the confrontation across the wall, the way he'd stared at her as though she was a zoological specimen. So that was her enemy, that old man. She'd have him. Oh yes. The boys heard her promise of revenge, and seemed content to have the matter taken out of their hands. "Give her the meat," said the black boy.

The other one stood up, removing the muslin cloth. The bacon smelt bad, but the sow nevertheless made wet noises of enthusiasm. Maybe she had forgiven them.

"Go on, quickly."

The boy took the first strip of bacon between finger and thumb and proffered it. The sow turned her mouth sideways up to it and ate, showing her yellowish teeth. It was gone quickly. The second, the third, fourth, fifth the same. The sixth and last piece she took with his fingers, snatched with such elegance and speed the boy could only cry out as her teeth champed through the thin digits and swallowed them. He withdrew his hand from over the sty wall, and gawped at this mutilation. She had done only a little damage, considering. The top of his thumb and half his index finger had gone. The wounds bled quickly, fully, splashing on to his shirt and his shoes. She grunted and snorted and seemed satisfied.

The boy yelped and ran.

"Tomorrow," said the sow to the remaining supplicant. "Not this old pig-meat. It must be white. White and lacy." She thought that was a fine joke.

"Yes," the boy said, “yes, of course."

"Without fail," she ordered.

"Yes."

"Or I come for him myself. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"I come for him myself, wherever he's hiding. I will eat him in his bed if I wish. In his sleep I will eat off his feet, then his legs, then his balls, then his hips -"

"Yes, yes."

"I want him," said the sow, grinding her trotter in the straw.

"He's mine."

"Henessey dead?" said Leverthal, head still down as she wrote one of her interminable reports. "It's another fabrication. One minute the child says he's in the Centre, the next he's dead. The boy can't even get his story straight."

It was difficult to argue with the contradictions unless one accepted the idea of ghosts as readily as Lacey. There was no way Redman was going to try and argue that point with the woman. That part was a nonsense. Ghosts were foolishness; just fears made visible. But the possibility of Henessey's suicide made more sense to Redman. He pressed on with his argument.

"So where did Lacey get this story from, about Henessey's death? It's a funny thing to invent." She deigned to look up, her face drawn up into itself like a snail in its shell.

"Fertile imaginations are par for the course here. If you heard the tales I've got on tape: the exoticism of some of them would blow your head open."

"Have there been suicides here?"

"In my time?" She thought for a moment, pen poised. "Two attempts. Neither, I think, intended to succeed. Cries for help."

"Was Henessey one?"

She allowed herself a little sneer as she shook her head.

"Henessey was unstable in a completely different direction. He thought he was going to live forever. That was his little dream: Henessey the Nietzchean Superman. He had something close to contempt for the common herd. As far as he was concerned, he was a breed apart. As far beyond the rest of us mere mortals as he was beyond that wretched-"

He knew she was going to say pig, but she stopped just short of the word.

"Those wretched animals on the farm," she said, looking back down at her report.

"Henessey spent time at the farm?"

"No more than any other boy," she lied. "None of them like farm duties, but it's part of the work rota. Mucking out isn't a very pleasant occupation. I can testify to that."

The lie he knew she'd told made Redman keep back Lacey's final detail: that Henessey's death had taken place in the pig-sty.

He shrugged, and took an entirely different tack.

"Is Lacey under any medication?"

"Some sedatives."

"Are the boys always sedated when they've been in a fight?"

"Only if they try to make escapes. We haven't got enough staff to supervise the likes of Lacey. I don't see why you're so concerned."

"I want him to trust me. I promised him. I don't want him let down."

"Frankly, all this sounds suspiciously like special pleading. The boy's one of many. No unique problems, and no particular hope of redemption."

"Redemption?" It was a strange word.

"Rehabilitation, whatever you choose to call it. Look, Redman, I'll be frank. There's a general feeling that you're not really playing ball here."

"Oh?"

"We all feel, I think this includes the Governor, that you should let us go about our business the way we're used to. Learn the ropes before you start -"

"Interfering."

She nodded. "It's as good a word as any. You're making enemies."

"Thank you for the warning."

"This job's difficult enough without enemies, believe me."

She attempted a conciliatory look, which Redman ignored.

Enemies he could live with, liars he couldn't.

The Governor's room was locked, as it had been for a full week now. Explanations differed as to where he was. Meetings with funding bodies was a favourite reason touted amongst the staff, though the Secretary claimed she didn't exactly know. There were Seminars at the University he was running, somebody said, to bring some research to bear on the problems of Remand Centres. Maybe the Governor was at one of those. If Mr. Redman wanted, he could leave a message, the Governor would get it.

Back in the workshop, Lacey was waiting for him. It was almost seven-fifteen: classes were well over. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting, sir."

"What for?"

"You, sir. I wanted to give you a letter, sir. For me mam. Will you get it to her?"

"You can send it through the usual channels, can't you? Give it to the Secretary, she'll forward it. You're allowed two letters a week."

Lacey's face fell.

"They read them, sir: in case you write something you shouldn't. And if you do, they burn them." "And you've written something you shouldn't?"

He nodded.

"What?"

"About Kevin. I told her all about Kevin, about what happened to him."

"I'm not sure you've got your facts right about Henessey."

The boy shrugged. "It's true, sir," he said quietly, apparently no longer caring if he convinced Redman or not "It's true. He's there, sir. In her."

"In who? What are you talking about?"

Maybe Lacey was speaking, as Leverthal had suggested, simply out of his fear. There had to be a limit to his patience with the boy, and

this was just about it.

A knock on the door, and a spotty individual called Slape was staring at him through the wired glass. "Come in."

"Urgent telephone call for you, sir. In the Secretary's Office."

Redman hated the telephone. Unsavory machine: it never brought good tidings.

"Urgent. Who from?"

Slape shrugged and picked at his face.

"Stay with Lacey, will you?"

Slape looked unhappy with the prospect.

"Here, sir?" he asked.

"Here."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm relying on you, so don't let me down."

"No, sir."

Redman turned to Lacey. The bruised look was a wound now open, as he wept.

"Give me your letter. I'll take it to the Office."

Lacey had thrust the envelope into his pocket. He retrieved it unwillingly, and handed it across to Redman. "Say thank you."

"Thank you, sir."

The corridors were empty.

It was television time, and the nightly worship of the box had begun. They would be glued to the black and white set that dominated the Recreation Room, sitting through the pap of Cop Shows and Game Shows and Wars from the World Shows with their jaws open and their minds closed. A hypnotized silence would fall on the assembled company until a promise of violence or a hint of sex. Then the room would erupt in whistles, obscenities, and shouts of encouragement,

only to subside again into sullen silence during the dialogue, as they waited for another gun, another breast. He could hear gunfire and music, even now, echoing down the corridor.

The Office was open, but the Secretary wasn't there. Gone home presumably. The clock in the Office said eight nineteen. Redman amended his watch.

The telephone was on the hook. Whoever had called him had tired of waiting, leaving no message. Relieved as he was that the call wasn't urgent enough to keep the caller hanging on, he now felt disappointed not to be speaking to the outside world. Like Crusoe seeing a sail, only to have it sweep by his island.

Ridiculous: this wasn't his prison. He could walk out whenever he liked. He would walk out that very night: and be Crusoe no longer.

He contemplated leaving Lacey's letter on the desk, but thought better of it. He had promised to protect the boy's interests, and that he would do. If necessary, he'd post the letter himself.

Thinking of nothing in particular, he started back towards the workshop. Vague wisps of unease floated in his system, clogging his responses. Sighs sat in his throat, scowls on his face. This damn place, he said aloud, not meaning the walls and the floors, but the trap they represented. He felt he could die here with his good intentions arrayed around him like flowers round a stiff, and nobody would know, or care, or mourn. Idealism was weakness here, compassion and indulgence. Unease was all: unease and -Silence.

That was what was wrong. Though the television still popped and screamed down the corridor, there was silence accompanying it. No wolf-whistles, no cat-calls.

Redman darted back to the vestibule and down the corridor to the Recreation Room. Smoking was allowed in this section of the building, and the area stank of stale cigarettes. Ahead, the noise of mayhem continued unabated. A woman screamed somebody's name. A man answered and was cut off by a blast of gunfire. Stories, half-told, hung in the air.

He reached the room, and opened the door.

The television spoke to him. "Get down!"

"He's got a gun!"

Another shot.

The woman, blonde, big-breasted, took the bullet in her heart, and died on the sidewalk beside the man she'd loved. The tragedy went unwatched. The Recreation Room was empty, the old armchairs and graffiti-carved stools placed around the television set for an audience who had better entertainment for the evening. Redman wove between the seats and turned the television off. As the silver-blue fluorescence died, and the insistent beat of the music was cut dead, he became aware, in the gloom, in the hush, of somebody at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Slape, sir."

"I told you to stay with Lacey."

"He had to go, sir."

"Go?"

"He ran off, sir. I couldn't stop him."

"Damn you. What do you mean, you couldn't stop him?"

Redman started to re-cross the room, catching his foot on a stool. It scraped on the linoleum, a little protest.

Slape twitched.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "I couldn't catch him. I've got a bad foot."

Yes, Slape did limp. "Which way did he go?" Slape shrugged. "Not sure, sir."

"Well, remember."

"No need to lose your temper, sir."

The 'sir' was slurred: a parody of respect. Redman found his hand itching to hit this pus-filled adolescent. He was within a couple of feet of the door. Slape didn't move aside.

"Out of my way, Slape."

"Really, sir, there's no way you can help him now. He's gone."

"I said, out of my way."

As he stepped forward to push Slape aside there was a click at navel-level and the bastard had a flick-knife pressed to Redman's belly. The point bit the fat of his stomach.

"There's really no need to go after him, sir."

"What in God's name are you doing, Slape?"

"We're just playing a game," he said through teeth gone grey.

"There's no real harm in it. Best leave well alone."

The point of the knife had drawn blood. Warmly, it wended its way down into Redman's groin. Slape was prepared to kill him; no doubt of that. Whatever this game was, Slape was having a little fun all of his own. Killing teacher, it was called. The knife was still being pressed, infinitesimally slowly, through the wall of Redman's flesh. The little rivulet of blood had thickened into a stream.

"Kevin likes to come out and play once in a while," said Slape.

"Henessey?"

"Yes, you like to call us by our second names, don't you? That's more manly isn't it? That means we're not children, that means we're men. Kevin isn't quite a man though, you see sir. He's never wanted to be a man. In fact, I think he hated the idea. You know why? (The knife divided muscle now, just gently). He thought once you were a man, you started to die: and Kevin used to say he'd never die."

"Never die." "Never."

"I want to meet him."

"Everybody does, sir. He's charismatic. That's the Doctor's word for him: Charismatic."

"I want to meet this charismatic fellow."

"Soon."

"Now."

"I said soon."

Redman took the knife-hand at the wrist so quickly Slape had no chance to press the weapon home. The adolescent's response was slow, doped perhaps, and Redman had the better of him. The knife dropped from his hand as Redman's grip tightened, the other hand took Slape in a strangle-hold, easily rounding his emaciated neck. Redman's palm pressed on his assailant's Adam's apple, making him gargle.

"Where's Henessey? You take me to him."

The eyes that looked down at Redman were slurred as his words, the irises pin-pricks.

"Take me to him!" Redman demanded.

Slape's hand found Redman's cut belly, and his fist jabbed the wound. Redman cursed, letting his hold slip, and Slape almost slid out of his grasp, but Redman drove his knee into the other's groin, fast and sharp. Slape wanted to double up in agony, but the neck-hold prevented him. The knee rose again, harder. And again. Again. Spontaneous tears ran down Slape's face, coursing through the minefield of his boils.

"I can hurt you twice as badly as you can hurt me," Redman said, “so if you want to go on doing this all night I'm happy as a sand-boy."

Slape shook his head, grabbing his breath through his constricted windpipe in short, painful gasps. "You don't want any more?"

Slape shook his head again. Redman let go of him, and flung him across the corridor against the wall. Whimpering with pain, his face crimped, he slid down the wall into a fetal position, hands between his legs. "Where's Lacey?"

Slape had begun to shake; the words tumbled out. "Where d'you think? Kevin's got him."

"Where's Kevin?"

Slape looked up at Redman, puzzled.

"Don't you know?"

"I wouldn't ask if I did, would I?"

Slape seemed to pitch forward as he spoke, letting out a sigh of pain. Redman's first thought was that the youth was collapsing, but

Slape had other ideas. The knife was suddenly in his hand again, snatched from the floor, and Slape was driving it up towards Redman's groin. He sidestepped the cut with a hair's breadth to spare, and Slape was on his feet again, the pain forgotten. The knife slit the air back and forth, Slape hissing his intention through his teeth. "Kill you, pig. Kill you, pig."

Then his mouth was wide and he was yelling: "Kevin! Kevin! Help me!"

The slashes were less and less accurate as Slape lost control of himself, tears, snot and sweat sliming his face as he stumbled towards his intended victim.

Redman chose his moment, and delivered a crippling blow to Slape's knee, the weak leg, he guessed. He guessed correctly.

Slape screamed, and staggered back, reeling round and hitting the wall face on. Redman followed through, pressing Slape's back. Too late, he realized what he'd done. Slape's body relaxed as his knife hand, crushed between wall and body, slid out, bloody and weapon less. Slape exhaled death-air, and collapsed heavily against the wall, driving the knife still deeper into his own gut. He was dead before he touched the ground.

Redman turned him over. He'd never become used to the suddenness of death. To be gone so quickly, like the image on the television screen. Switched off and blank. No message.

The utter silence of the corridors became overwhelming as he walked back towards the vestibule. The cut on his stomach was not significant, and the blood had made its own scabby bandage of his shirt, knitting cotton to flesh and sealing the wound. It scarcely hurt at all. But the cut was the least of his problems: he had mysteries to unravel now, and he felt unable to face them. The used, exhausted atmosphere of the place made him feel, in his turn, used and exhausted. There was no health to be had here, no goodness, no reason.

He believed, suddenly, in ghosts.

In the vestibule there was a light burning, a bare bulb suspended over the dead space. By it, he read Lacey's crumpled letter. The smudged words on the paper were like matches set to the tinder of his panic.

Mama, they fed me to the pig. Don't believe them if they said I never loved you, or if they said I ran away. I never did. They fed me to the pig. I love you.

Tommy.

He pocketed the letter and began to run out of the building and across the field. It was well dark now: a deep, starless dark, and the air was muggy. Even in daylight he wasn't sure of the route to the farm; it was worse by night. He was very soon lost, somewhere between the playing-field and the trees. It was too far to see the outline of the main building behind him, and the trees ahead all looked alike.

The night-air was foul; no wind to freshen tired limbs. It was as still outside as inside, as though the whole world had become an interior: a suffocating room bounded by a painted ceiling of cloud.

He stood in the dark, the blood thumping in his head, and tried to orient himself.

To his left, where he had guessed the out-houses to be, a light glimmered. Clearly he was completely mistaken about his position. The light was at the sty. It threw the ramshackle chicken run into silhouette as he stared at it. There were figures there, several; standing as if watching a spectacle he couldn't yet see.

He started towards the sty, not knowing what he would do once he reached it. If they were all armed like Slape, and shared his murderous intentions, then that would be the end of him. The thought didn't worry him. Somehow tonight to get off of this closed-down world was an attractive option. Down and out.

And there was Lacey. There'd been a moment of doubt, after speaking to Leverthal, when he'd wondered why he cared so much about the boy. That accusation of special pleading, it had a certain truth to it. Was there something in him that wanted Thomas Lacey naked beside him? Wasn't that the sub-text of Leverthal's remark? Even now, running uncertainly towards the lights, all he could think of was the boy's eyes, huge and demanding, looking deep into his.

Ahead there were figures in the night, wandering away from the farm. He could see them against the lights of the sty. Was it all over already? He made a long curve around to the left of the buildings to avoid the spectators as they left the scene. They made no noise: there was no chatter or laughter amongst them. Like a congregation leaving

a funeral they walked evenly in the dark, each apart from the other, heads bowed. It was eerie, to see these godless delinquents so subdued by reverence.

He reached the chicken-run without encountering any of them face to face.

There were still a few figures lingering around the pig-house. The wall of the sow's compartment was lined with candles, dozens and dozens of them. They burned steadily in the still air, throwing a rich warm light on to brick, and on to the faces of the few who still stared into the mysteries of the sty.

Leverthal was among them, as was the warder who'd knelt at Lacey's head that first day. Two or three boys were there too, whose faces he recognized but could put no name to.

There was a noise from the sty, the sound of the sow's feet on the straw as she accepted their stares. Somebody was speaking, but he couldn't make out who. An adolescent's voice, with a lilt to it. As the voice halted in its monologue, the warder and another of the boys broke rank, as if dismissed, and turned away into the dark. Redman crept a little closer. Time was of the essence now. Soon the first of the congregation would have crossed the field and be back in the Main Building. They'd see Slape's corpse: raise the alarm. He must find Lacey now, if indeed Lacey was still to be found.

Leverthal saw him first. She looked up from the sty and nodded a greeting, apparently unconcerned by his arrival. It was as if his appearance at this place was inevitable, as if all routes led back to the farm, to the straw house and the smell of excrement. It made a kind of sense that she'd believe that. He almost believed it himself.

"Leverthal," he said.

She smiled at him, openly. The boy beside her raised his head and smiled too.

"Are you Henessey?" he asked, looking at the boy.

The youth laughed, and so did Leverthal.

"No," she said. "No. No. No. Henessey is here."

She pointed into the sty.

Redman walked the few remaining yards to the wall of the sty, expecting and not daring to expect, the straw and the blood and the pig and Lacey.

But Lacey wasn't there. Just the sow, big and beady as ever, standing amongst pats of her own ordure, her huge, ridiculous ears flapping over her eyes.

"Where's Henessey?" asked Redman, meeting the sow's gaze.

"Here," said the boy.

"This is a pig."

"She ate him," said the youth, still smiling. He obviously thought the idea delightful. "She ate him: and he speaks out of her."

Redman wanted to laugh. This made Lacey's tales of ghosts seem almost plausible by comparison. They were telling him the pig was possessed.

"Did Henessey hang himself, as Tommy said?"

Leverthal nodded.

"In the sty?"

Another nod.

Suddenly the pig took on a different aspect. In his imagination he saw her reaching up to sniff at the feet of Henessey's twitching body, sensing the death coming over it, salivating at the thought of its flesh. He saw her licking the dew that oozed from its skin as it rotted, lapping at it, nibbling daintily at first, then devouring it. It wasn't too difficult to understand how the boys could have made a mythology of that atrocity: inventing hymns to it, attending upon the pig like a god. The candles, the reverence, the intended sacrifice of Lacey: it was evidence of sickness, but it was no more strange than a thousand other customs of faith. He even began to understand Lacey's lassitude, his inability to fight the powers that overtook him.

Mama, they fed me to the pig.

Not Mama, help me, save me. Just: they gave me to the pig.

All this he could understand: they were children, many of them under-educated, some verging on mental instability, all susceptible to

superstition. But that didn't explain Leverthal. She was staring into the sty again, and Redman registered for the first time that her hair was unclipped, and lay on her shoulders, honey-coloured in the candlelight. "It looks like a pig to me, plain and simple," he said.

"She speaks with his voice," Leverthal said, quietly. "Speaks in tongues, you might say. You'll hear him in a while. My darling boy."

Then he understood. "You and Henessey?"

"Don't look so horrified," she said. "He was eighteen: hair blacker than you've ever seen. And he loved me." "Why did he hang himself?"

"To live forever," she said, “so he'd never be a man, and die."

"We didn't find him for six days," said the youth, almost whispering it in Redman's ear, “and even then she wouldn't let anybody near him, once she had him to herself. The pig, I mean. Not the Doctor. Everyone loved Kevin, you see," he whispered intimately. "He was beautiful."

"And where's Lacey?"

Leverthal's loving smile decayed.

"With Kevin," said the youth, “where Kevin wants him." He pointed through the door of the sty. There was a body lying on the straw, back to the door.

"If you want him, you'll have to go and get him," said the boy, and the next moment he had the back of Redman's neck in a vice-like grip.

The sow responded to the sudden action. She started to stamp the straw, showing the whites of her eyes. Redman tried to shrug off the boy's grip, at the same time delivering an elbow to his belly. The boy backed off, winded and cursing, only to be replaced by Leverthal.

"Go to him," she said as she snatched at Redman's hair. "G o to him if you want him." Her nails raked across his temple and nose, just missing his eyes.

"Get off me!" he said, trying to shake the woman off, but she clung, her head lashing back and forth as she tried to press him over the wall.

The rest happened with horrid speed. Her long hair brushed

through a candle flame and her head caught fire, the flames climbing quickly. Shrieking for help she stumbled heavily against the gate. It failed to support her weight, and gave inward. Redman watched helplessly as the burning woman fell amongst the straw. The flames spread enthusiastically across the forecourt towards the sow, lapping up the kindling.

Even now, in extremis, the pig was still a pig. No miracles here: no speaking, or pleading, in tongues. The animal panicked as the blaze surrounded her, cornering her stamping bulk and licking at her flanks. The air was filled with the stench of singeing bacon as the flames ran up her sides and over her head, chasing through her bristles like a grass-fire.

Her voice was a pig's voice, her complaints a pig's complaints. Hysterical grunts escaped her lips and she hurtled across the forecourt of the sty and out of the broken gate, trampling Leverthal.

The sow's body, still burning, was a magic thing in the night as she careered across the field, weaving about in her pain. Her cries did not diminish as the dark ate her up, they seemed just to echo back and forth across the field, unable to find a way out of the locked room.

Redman stepped over Leverthal's fire-ridden corpse and into the sty. The straw was burning on every side, and the fire was creeping towards the door. He half-shut his eyes against the stinging smoke and ducked into the pig-house. Lacey was lying as he had been all along, back to the door. Redman turned the boy over. He was alive. He was awake. His face, bloated with tears and terror, stared up off his straw pillow, eyes so wide they looked fit to leap from his head.

"Get up," said Redman, leaning over the boy.

His small body was rigid, and it was all Redman could do to prize his limbs apart. With little words of care, he coaxed the boy to his feet as the smoke began to swirl into the pig-house.

"Come on, it's all right, come on."

He stood upright and something brushed his hair. Redman felt a little rain of worms across his face and glanced up to see Henessey, or what was left of him, still suspended from the crossbeam of the pig-house. His features were incomprehensible, blackened to a drooping mush. His body was raggedly gnawed off at the hip, and his innards hung from the fetid carcass, dangling in wormy loops in front of Redman's face.

Had it not been for the thick smoke the smell of the body would have been overpowering. As it was Redman was simply revolted, and his revulsion gave strength to his arm. He hauled Lacey out of the shadow of the body and pushed him through the door.

Outside the straw was no longer blazing as brightly, but the light of fire and candles and burning body still made him squint after the dark interior.

"Come on lad," he said, lifting the kid through the flames. The boy's eyes were button-bright, lunatic-bright. They said futility.

They crossed the sty to the gate, skipping Leverthal's corpse, and headed into the darkness of the open field. The boy seemed to be stirring from his stricken state with every step they took away from the farm. Behind them the sty was already a blazing memory. Ahead, the night was as still and impenetrable as ever.

Redman tried not to think of the pig. It must be dead by now, surely.

But as they ran, there seemed to be a noise in the earth as something huge kept pace with them, content to keep its distance, wary now but relentless in its pursuit.

He dragged on Lacey's arm, and hurried on, the ground sun baked beneath their feet. Lacey was whimpering now, no words as yet, but sound at least. It was a good sign, a sign Redman needed.

He'd had about his fill of insanity.

They reached the building without incident. The corridors were as empty as they'd been when he'd left an hour ago. Perhaps nobody had found Slape's corpse yet. It was possible. None of the boys had seemed in a fit mood for recreation. Perhaps they had slipped silently to their dormitories, to sleep off their worship.

It was time to find a phone and call the Police.

Man and boy walked down the corridor towards the Governor's Office hand in hand. Lacey had fallen silent again, but his expression was no longer so manic; it looked as though cleansing tears might be close. He sniffed; made noises in his throat.

His grip on Redman's hand tightened, then relaxed completely.

Ahead, the vestibule was in darkness. Somebody had smashed the bulb recently. It still rocked gently on its cable, illuminated by a seepage of dull light from the window.

"Come on. There's nothing to be afraid of. Come on, boy."

Lacey bent to Redman's hand and bit the flesh. The trick was so quick he let the boy go before he could prevent himself, and Lacey was showing his heels as he scooted away down the corridor away from the vestibule. No matter. He couldn't get far. For once Redman was glad the place had walls and bars.

Redman crossed the darkened vestibule to the Secretary's Office. Nothing moved. Whoever had broken the bulb was keeping very quiet, very still.

The telephone had been smashed too. Not just broken, smashed to smithereens.

Redman doubled back to the Governor's room. There was a telephone there; he'd not be stopped by vandals. The door was locked, of course, but Redman was prepared for that. He smashed the frosted glass in the window of the door with his elbow, and reached through to the other side. No key there.

To hell with it, he thought, and put his shoulder to the door. It was sturdy, strong wood, and the lock was good quality. His shoulder ached and the wound in his stomach had reopened by the time the lock gave, and he gained access to the room.

The floor was littered with straw; the smell inside made the sty seem sweet. The Governor was lying behind his desk, his heart eaten out.

"The pig," said Redman. "The pig. The pig." And saying, “the pig', he reached for the phone.

A sound. He turned, and met the blow full-face. It broke his cheek-bone and his nose. The room mottled, and went white.

The vestibule was no longer dark. Candles were burning, it seemed hundreds of them, in every corner, on every edge. But then his head was swimming, his eyesight blurred with concussion. It could have been a single candle, multiplied by senses that could no longer be trusted to tell the truth.

He stood in the middle of the arena of the vestibule, not quite knowing how he could be standing, for his legs felt numb and useless beneath him. At the periphery of his vision, beyond the light of the candles, he could hear people talking. No, not really talking. They weren't proper words. They were nonsense sounds, made by people who may or may not have been there.

Then he heard the grunt, the low, asthmatic grunt of the sow, and straight ahead she emerged from the swimming light of the candles. She was bright and beautiful no longer. Her flanks were charred, her beady eyes withered, her snout somehow twisted out of true. She hobbled towards him very slowly, and very slowly the figure astride her became apparent. It was Tommy Lacey of course, naked as the day he was born, his body as pink and as hairless as one of her farrow, his face as innocent of human feeling. His eyes were now her eyes, as he guided the great sow by her ears. And the noise of the sow, the snaffling sound, was not out of the pig's mouth, but out of his. His was the voice of the pig.

Redman said his name, quietly. Not Lacey, but Tommy. The boy seemed not to hear. Only then, as the pig and her rider approached, did Redman register why he hadn't fallen on his face.

There was a rope around his neck.

Even as he thought the thought, the noose tightened, and he was hauled off his feet into the air. No pain, but a terrible horror, worse, so much worse than pain, opened in him, a gorge of loss and regret, and all he was sank away into it.

Below him, the sow and the boy had come to a halt, beneath his jangling feet. The boy, still grunting, had climbed off the pig and was squatting down beside the beast. Through the greying air Redman could see the curve of the boy's spine, the flawless skin of his back. He saw too the knotted rope that protruded from between his pale buttocks, the end frayed. For all the world like the tail of a pig.

The sow put its head up, though its eyes were beyond seeing.

He liked to think that she suffered, and would suffer now until she died. It was almost sufficient, to think of that. Then the sow's mouth opened, and she spoke. He wasn't certain how the words came, but they came. A boy's voice, lilting.

"This is the state of the beast," it said, “to eat and be eaten."

Then the sow smiled, and Redman felt, though he had believed himself numb, the first shock of pain as Lacey's teeth bit off a piece from his foot, and the boy clambered, snorting, up his saviour's body to kiss out his life.

V: SEX, DEATH AND STARSHINE

Diane ran her scented fingers through the two days' growth of ginger stubble on Terry's chin. "I love it," she said, "Even the grey bits."

She loved everything about him, or at least that's what she claimed.

When he kissed her: I love it.

When he undressed her: I love it.

When he slid his briefs off: I love it, I love it, I love it.

She'd go down on him with such unalloyed enthusiasm, all he could do was watch the top of her ash-blonde head bobbing at his groin, and hope to God nobody chanced to walk into the dressing-room. She was a married woman, after all, even if she was an actress. He had a wife himself, somewhere. This tкte-a-tкte would make some juicy copy for one of the local rags, and here he was trying to garner a reputation as a serious-minded director; no gimmicks, no gossip; just art.

Then, even thoughts of ambition would be dissolved on her tongue, as she played havoc with his nerve-endings. She wasn't much of an actress, but by God she was quite a performer. Faultless technique; immaculate timing: she knew either by instinct or by rehearsal just when to pick up the rhythm and bring the whole scene to a satisfying conclusion. When she'd finished milking the moment dry, he almost wanted to applaud. The whole cast of Calloway's production of Twelfth Night knew about the affair, of course. There'd be the occasional snide comment passed if actress and director were both late for rehearsals, or if she arrived looking full, and he flushed. He tried to persuade her to control the cat-with-the-cream look that crept over her face, but she just wasn't that good a deceiver. Which was rich, considering her profession.

But then La Duvall, as Edward insisted on calling her, didn't need to be a great player, she was famous. So what if she spoke Shakespeare like it was Hiawatha, dum de dum de dum de dum? So what if her grasp of psychology was dubious, her logic faulty, her projection inadequate? So what if she had as much sense of poetry as she did propriety? She was a star, and that meant business.

There was no taking that away from her: her name was money. The Elysium Theatre publicity announced her claim to fame in three inch

Roman Bold, black on yellow: "Diane Duvall: star of The Love Child."

The Love Child. Possibly the worst soap opera to cavort across the screens of the nation in the history of that genre, two solid hours a week of under-written characters and mind-numbing dialogue, as a result of which it consistently drew high ratings, and its performers became, almost overnight, brilliant stars in television's rhinestone heaven. Glittering there, the brightest of the bright, was Diane Duvall.

Maybe she wasn't born to play the classics, but Jesus was she good box-office. And in this day and age, with theatres deserted, all that mattered was the number of punters on seats.

Calloway had resigned himself to the fact that this would not be the definitive Twelfth Night, but if the production were successful, and with Diane in the role of Viola it had every chance, and it might open a few doors to him in the West End. Besides, working with the ever-adoring, ever-demanding Miss D. Duvall had its compensations.

Galloway pulled up his serge trousers, and looked down at her. She was giving him that winsome smile of hers, the one she used in the letter scene. Expression Five in the Duvall repertoire, somewhere between Virginal and Motherly.

He acknowledged the smile with one from his own stock, a small, loving look that passed for genuine at a yard's distance.

Then he consulted his watch.

"God, we're late, sweetie."

She licked her lips. Did she really like the taste that much?

"I'd better fix my hair," she said, standing up and glancing in the long mirror beside the shower. "Yes."

"Are you OK?"

"Couldn't be better," he replied. He kissed her lightly on the nose and left her to her teasing.

On his way to the stage he ducked into the Men's Dressing Room to adjust his clothing, and dowse his burning cheeks with cold water. Sex always induced a giveaway mottling on his face and upper chest. Bending to splash water on himself Galloway studied his features critically in the mirror over the sink. After thirty-six years of holding

the signs of age at bay, he was beginning to look the part. He was no more the juvenile lead. There was an indisputable puffiness beneath his eyes, which was nothing to do with sleeplessness and there were lines too, on his forehead, and round his mouth. He didn't look the wunderkind any longer; the secrets of his debauchery were written all over his face. The excess of sex, booze and ambition, the frustration of aspiring and just missing the main chance so many times. What would he look like now, he thought bitterly, if he'd been content to be some unenterprising nobody working in a minor rep, guaranteed a house of ten aficionados every night, and devoted to Brecht? Face as smooth as a baby's bottom probably, most of the people in the socially-committed theatre had that look. Vacant and content, poor cows.

"Well, you pays your money and you takes your choice," he told himself. He took one last look at the haggard cherub in the mirror, reflecting that, crow's feet or not, women still couldn't resist him, and went out to face the trials and tribulations of Act III.

On stage there was a heated debate in progress. The carpenter, his name was Jake, had built two hedges for Olivia's garden. They still had to be covered with leaves, but they looked quite impressive, running the depth of the stage to the cyclorama, where the rest of the garden would be painted. None of this symbolic stuff. A garden was a garden: green grass, blue sky. That's the way the audience liked it North of Birmingham, and Terry had some sympathy for their plain tastes.

"Terry, love."

Eddie Cunningham had him by the hand and elbow, escorting him into the fray.

"What's the problem?"

"Terry, love, you cannot be serious about these fucking (it came trippingly off the tongue: fucking) hedges. Tell Uncle Eddie you're not serious before I throw a fit." Eddie pointed towards the offending hedges. "I mean look at them." As he spoke a thin plume of spittle fizzed in the air.

"What's the problem?" Terry asked again.

"Problem? Blocking, love, blocking. Think about it. We've rehearsed this whole scene with me bobbing up and down like a March hare. Up right, down left – but it doesn't work if I haven't got access round the back. And look! These fucking things are flush with the backdrop."

"Well they have to be, for the illusion, Eddie."

"I can't get round though, Terry. You must see my point."

He appealed to the few others on stage: the carpenters, two technicians, three actors.

"I mean – there's just not enough time."

"Eddie, we'll re-block."

"Oh."

That took the wind out of his sails.

"No?"

"Urn."

"I mean it seems easiest, doesn't it?"

"Yes… I just liked…

"I know."

"Well. Needs must. What about the croquet?"

"We'll cut that too."

"All that business with the croquet mallets? The bawdy stuff?"

"It'll all have to go. I'm sorry, I haven't thought this through. I wasn't thinking straight."

Eddie flounced.

"That's all you ever do, love, think straight…"

Titters. Terry let it pass. Eddie had a genuine point of criticism; he had failed to consider the problems of the hedge design.

"I'm sorry about the business; but there's no way we can accommodate it."

"You won't be cutting anybody else's business, I'm sure," said Eddie. He threw a glance over Galloway's shoulder at Diane, then headed for the dressing-room. Exit enraged actor, stage left. Calloway made no attempt to stop him. It would have worsened the situation

considerably to spoil his departure. He just breathed out a quiet 'oh Jesus', and dragged a wide hand down over his face. That was the fatal flaw of this profession: actors.

"Will somebody fetch him back?" he said.

Silence.

"Where's Ryan?"

The Stage Manager showed his bespectacled face over the offending hedge.

"Sorry?"

"Ryan, love – will you please take a cup of coffee to Eddie and coax him back into the bosom of the family?" Ryan pulled a face that said: you offended him, you fetch him.

But Galloway had passed this particular buck before: he was a past master at it. He just stared at Ryan, defying him to contradict his request, until the other man dropped his eyes and nodded his acquiescence.

"Sure," he said glumly.

"Good man."

Ryan cast him an accusatory look, and disappeared in pursuit of Ed Cunningham.

"No show without Belch," said Galloway, trying to warm up the atmosphere a little. Someone grunted: and the small half-circle of onlookers began to disperse. Show over.

"OK, OK," said Galloway, picking up the pieces, “let's get to work. We'll run through from the top of the scene. Diane, are you ready?"

"Yes."

"OK. Shall we run it?"

He turned away from Olivia's garden and the waiting actors just to gather his thoughts. Only the stage working lights were on, the auditorium was in darkness. It yawned at him insolently, row upon row of empty seats, defying him to entertain them. Ah, the loneliness of the long-distance director. There were days in this business when

the thought of life as an accountant seemed a consummation devoutly to be wished, to paraphrase the Prince of Denmark. In the Gods of the Elysium, somebody moved. Galloway looked up from his doubts and stared through the swarthy air. Had Eddie taken residence on the very back row? No, surely not. For one thing, he hadn't had time to get all the way up there.

"Eddie?" Galloway ventured, capping his hand over his eyes. "Is that you?"

He could just make the figure out. No, not a figure, figures. Two people, edging their way along the back row, making for the exit. Whoever it was, it certainly wasn't Eddie.

"That isn't Eddie, is it?" said Galloway, turning back into the fake garden.

"No," someone replied.

It was Eddie speaking. He was back on stage, leaning on one of the hedges, cigarette clamped between his lips. "Eddie…"

"It's all right," said the actor good-humouredly, “don't grovel. I can't bear to see a pretty man grovel." "We'll see if we can slot the mallet-business in somewhere," said Calloway, eager to be conciliatory. Eddie shook his head, and flicked ash off his cigarette.

"No need."

"Really -”

"It didn't work too well anyhow."

The Grand Circle doo r creaked a little as it closed behind the visitors. Galloway didn't bother to look round. They'd gone, whoever they were.

"There was somebody in the house this afternoon." Hammersmith looked up from the sheets of figures he was poring over.

"Oh?" his eyebrows were eruptions of wire-thick hair that seemed ambitious beyond their calling. They were raised high above Hammersmith's tiny eyes in patently fake surprise. He plucked at his bottom lip with nicotine stained fingers.

"Any idea who it was?"

He plucked on, still staring up at the younger man; undisguised contempt on his face.

"Is it a problem?"

"I just want to know who was in looking at the rehearsal that's all. I think I've got a perfect right to ask." "Perfect right," said Hammersmith, nodding slightly and making his lips into a pale bow.

"There was talk of somebody coming up from the National," said Galloway. "My agents were arranging something. I just don't want somebody coming in without me knowing about it. Especially if they're important." Hammersmith was already studying the figures again. His voice was tired.

"Terry: if there's someone in from the South Bank to look your opus over, I promise you, you'll be the first to be informed. All right?"

The inflexion was so bloody rude. So run-along-little-boy. Galloway itched to hit him.

"I don't want people watching rehearsals unless I authorize it, Hammersmith. Hear me? And I want to know who was in today."

The Manager sighed heavily.

"Believe me, Terry," he said, "I don't know myself. I suggest you ask Tallulah – she was front of house this afternoon. If somebody came in, presumably she saw them."

He sighed again.

"All right… Terry?"

Calloway left it at that. He had his suspicions about Hammersmith. The man couldn't give a shit about theatre, he never failed to make that absolutely plain; he affected an exhausted tone whenever anything but money was mentioned, as though matters of aesthetics were beneath his notice. And he had a word, loudly administered, for actors and directors alike: butterflies. One day wonders. In Hammersmith's world only money was forever, and the Elysium Theatre stood on prime land, land a wise man could turn a tidy profit on if he played his cards right. Galloway was certain he'd sell off the place tomorrow if he could maneuver it. A satellite town like Redditch, growing as Birmingham grew, didn't need theatres, it needed offices, hypermarkets, warehouses: it needed, to quote the

councilors, growth through investment in new industry. It also needed prime sites to build that industry upon. No mere art could survive such pragmatism.

Tallulah was not in the box, nor in the foyer, nor in the Green Room.

Irritated both by Hammersmith's incivility and Tallulah's disappearance, Galloway went back into the auditorium to pick up his jacket and go to get drunk. The rehearsal was over and the actors long gone. The bare hedges looked somewhat small from the back row of the stalls. Maybe they needed an extra few inches. He made a note on the back of a show bill he found in his pocket: Hedges, bigger?

A footfall made him look up, and a figure had appeared on stage. A smooth entrance, up-stage centre, where the hedges converged. Galloway didn't recognize the man.

"Mr… Galloway? Mr… Terence Galloway?"

"Yes?"

The visitor walked down stage to where, in an earlier age, the footlights would have been, and stood looking out into the auditorium.

"My apologies for interrupting your train of thought."

"No problem."

"I wanted a word."

"With me?"

"If you would."

Galloway wandered down to the front of the stalls, appraising the stranger.

He was dressed in shades of grey from head to foot. A grey worsted suit, grey shoes, a grey cravat. Pisselegant, was Galloway's first, uncharitable summation. But the man cut an impressive figure nevertheless. His face beneath the shadow of his brim was difficult to discern.

"Allow me to introduce myself."

The voice was persuasive, cultured. Ideal for advertisement voice-overs: soap commercials, maybe. After Hammersmith's bad manners, the voice came as a breath of good breeding.

"My name is Lichfield. Not that I expect that means much to a man of your tender years."

Tender years: well, well. Maybe there was still something of the wunderkind in his face.

"Are you a critic?" Galloway inquired.

The laugh that emanated from beneath the immaculately-swept brim was ripely ironical.

"In the name of Jesus, no," Lichfield replied.

"I'm sorry, then, you have me at a loss."

"No need for an apology."

"Were you in the house this afternoon?"

Lichfield ignored the question. "I realize you're a busy man, Mr… Galloway, and I don't want to waste your time. The theatre is my business, as it is yours. I think we must consider ourselves allies, though we have never met." Ah, the great brotherhood. It made Galloway want to spit, the familiar claims of sentiment. When he thought of the number of so-called allies that had cheerfully stabbed him in the back; and in return the playwrights whose work he'd smilingly slanged, the actors he'd crushed with a casual quip. Brotherhood be damned, it was dog eat dog, same as any over-subscribed profession.

"I have," Lichfield was saying, “an abiding interest in the Elysium." There was a curious emphasis on the word abiding. It sounded positively funereal from Lichfield's lips. Abide with me.

"Oh?"

"Yes, I've spent many happy hours in this theatre, down the years, and frankly it pains me to carry this burden of news."

"What news?"

"Mr. Galloway, I have to inform you that your Twelfth Night will be the last production the Elysium will see." The statement didn't come as

much of a surprise, but it still hurt, and the internal wince must have registered on Calloway's face.

"Ah… so you didn't know. I thought not. They always keep the artists in ignorance don't they? It's a satisfaction the Apollonians will never relinquish. The accountant's revenge."

"Hammersmith," said Galloway.

"Hammersmith."

"Bastard."

"His clan are never to be trusted, but then I hardly need to tell you that."

"Are you sure about the closure?"

"Certainly. He'd do it tomorrow if he could."

"But why? I've done Stoppard here, Tennessee Williams – always played to good houses. It doesn't make sense." "It makes admirable financial sense, I'm afraid, and if you think in figures, as Hammersmith does, there's no riposte to simple arithmetic. The Elysium's getting old. We're all getting old. We creak. We feel our age in our joints: our instinct is to lie down and be gone away."

Gone away: the voice became melodramatically thin, a whisper of longing.

"How do you know about this?"

"I was, for many years, a trustee of the theatre, and since my retirement I've made it my business to – what's the phrase? – keep my ear to the ground. It's difficult, in this day and age, to evoke the triumph this stage has seen…" His voice trailed away, in a reverie. It seemed true, not an effect.

Then, business-like once more: "This theatre is about to die, Mr. Galloway. You will be present at the last rites, through no fault of your own. I felt you ought to be warned."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. Tell me, were you ever an actor yourself?"

"What makes you think that?"

"The voice."

"Too rhetorical by half, I know. My curse, I'm afraid. I can scarcely ask for a cup of coffee without sounding like Lear in the storm."

He laughed, heartily, at his own expense. Galloway began to warm to the fellow. Maybe he was a little archaic looking, perhaps even slightly absurd, but there was a full-bloodedness about his manner that caught Galloway's imagination. Lichfield wasn't apologetic about his love of theatre, like so many in the profession, people who trod the boards as a second-best, their souls sold to the movies.

"I have, I will confess, dabbled in the craft a little," Lichfield confided, “but I just don't have the stamina for it, I'm afraid. Now my wife -”

Wife? Galloway was surprised Lichfield had a heterosexual bone in his body.

"- My wife Constantia has played here on a number of occasions, and I may say very successfully. Before the war of course."

"It's a pity to close the place."

"Indeed. But there are no last act miracles to be performed, I'm afraid. The Elysium will be rubble in six weeks' time, and there's an end to it. I just wanted you to know that interests other than the crassly commercial are watching over this closing production. Think of us as guardian angels. We wish you well, Terence, we all wish you well." It was a genuine sentiment, simply stated. Galloway was touched by this man's concern, and a little chastened by it. It put his own stepping-stone ambitions in an unflattering perspective. Lichfield went on: "We care to see this theatre end its days in suitable style, then die a good death."

"Damn shame."

"Too late for regrets by a long chalk. We should never have given up Dionysus for Apollo."

"What?"

"Sold ourselves to the accountants, to legitimacy, to the likes of Mr… Hammersmith, whose soul, if he has one, must be the size of my fingernail, and grey as a louse's back. We should have had the courage of our depictions, I think. Served poetry and lived under the stars."

Galloway didn't quite follow the allusions, but he got the general drift, and respected the viewpoint. Off stage left, Diane's voice cut the solemn atmosphere like a plastic knife.

"Terry? Are you there?"

The spell was broken: Galloway hadn't been aware how hypnotic Lichfield's presence was until that other voice came between them. Listening to him was like being rocked in familiar arms. Lichfield stepped to the edge of the stage, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial rasp.

"One last thing, Terence-”

"Yes?"

"Your Viola. She lacks, if you'll forgive my pointing it out, the special qualities required for the role." Galloway hung fire.

"I know," Lichfield continued, “personal loyalties prevent honesty in these matters."

"No," Galloway replied, “you're right. But she's popular."

"So was bear-baiting, Terence."

A luminous smile spread beneath the brim, hanging in the shadow like the grin of the Cheshire Gat. "I'm only joking," said Lichfield, his rasp a chuckle now. "Bears can be charming."

"Terry, there you are."

Diane appeared, over-dressed as usual, from behind the tabs. There was surely an embarrassing confrontation in the air. But Lichfield was walking away down the false perspective of the hedges towards the backdrop. "Here I am," said Terry.

"Who are you talking to?"

But Lichfield had exited, as smoothly and as quietly as he had entered. Diane hadn't even seen him go. "Oh, just an angel," said Galloway.

The first Dress Rehearsal wasn't, all things considered, as bad as Galloway had anticipated: it was immeasurably worse. Cues were lost, props mislaid, entrances missed; the comic business seemed ill-contrived and laborious; the performances either hopelessly

overwrought or trifling. This was a Twelfth Night that seemed to last a year. Halfway through the third act Galloway glanced at his watch, and realized an uncut performance of Macbeth (with interval) would now be over.

He sat in the stalls with his head buried in his hands, contemplating the work that he still had to do if he was to bring this production up to scratch. Not for the first time on this show he felt helpless in the face of the casting problems. Cues could be tightened, props rehearsed with, entrances practised until they were engraved on the memory. But a bad actor is a bad actor is a bad actor. He could labour till doomsday neatening and sharpening, but he could not make a silk purse of the sow's ear that was Diane Duvall.

With all the skill of an acrobat she contrived to skirt every significance, to ignore every opportunity to move the audience, to avoid every nuance the playwright would insist on putting in her way. It was a performance heroic in its ineptitude, reducing the delicate characterization Galloway had been at pains to create to a single-note whine. This Viola was soap-opera pap, less human than the hedges, and about as green.

The critics would slaughter her.

Worse than that, Lichfield would be disappointed. To his considerable surprise the impact of Lichfield's appearance hadn't dwindled; Galloway couldn't forget his actorly projection, his posing, his rhetoric. It had moved him more deeply than he was prepared to admit, and the thought of this Twelfth Night, with this Viola, becoming the swansong of Lichfield's beloved Elysium perturbed and embarrassed him. It seemed somehow ungrateful. He'd been warned often enough about a director's burdens, long before he became seriously embroiled in the profession. His dear departed guru at the Actors' Centre, Well beloved (he of the glass eye), had told Galloway from the beginning: "A director is the loneliest creature on God 's earth. He knows what's good and bad in a show, or he should if he's worth his salt, and he has to carry that information around with him and keep smiling."

It hadn't seemed so difficult at the time.

"This job isn't about succeeding," Well beloved used to say, “it's about learning not to fall on your sodding face." Good advice as it turned out. He could still see Well beloved handing out that wisdom on a plate, his bald head shiny, his living eye glittering with cynical

delight. No man on earth, Galloway had thought, loved theatre with more passion than Well beloved, and surely no man could have been more scathing about its pretensions.

It was almost one in the morning by the time they'd finished the wretched run-through, gone through the notes, and separated, glum and mutually resentful, into the night. Galloway wanted none of their company tonight: No late drinking in one or others' digs, no mutual ego-massage. He had a cloud of gloom all to himself, and neither wine, women nor song would disperse it. He could barely bring himself to look Diane in the face. His notes to her, broadcast in front of the rest of the cast, had been acidic. Not that it would do much good.

In the foyer, he met Tallulah, still spry though it was long after an old lady's bedtime.

"Are you locking up tonight?" he asked her, more for something to say than because he was actually curious. "I always lock up," she said. She was well over seventy: too old for her job in the box office, and too tenacious to be easily removed. But then that was all academic now, wasn't it? He wondered what her response would be when she heard the news of the closure. It would probably break her brittle heart. Hadn't Hammersmith once told him Tallulah had been at the theatre since she was a girl of fifteen?

"Well, goodnight Tallulah."

She gave him a tiny nod, as always. Then she reached out and took Galloway's arm.

"Yes?"

"Mr… Lichfield…" she began.

"What about Mr… Lichfield?"

"He didn't like the rehearsal."

"He was in tonight?"

"Oh yes," she replied, as though Galloway was an imbecile for thinking otherwise, “of course he was in." "I didn't see him."

"Well… no matter. He wasn't very pleased."

Galloway tried to sound indifferent.

"It can't be helped."

"Your show is very close to his heart."

"I realize that," said Galloway, avoiding Tallulah's accusing looks. He had quite enough to keep him awake tonight, without her disappointed tones ringing in his ears.

He loosed his arm, and made for the door. Tallulah made no attempt to stop him. She just said: "You should have seen Constantia."

Constantia? Where had he heard that name? Of course, Lichfield's wife.

"She was a wonderful Viola."

He was too tired for this mooning over dead actresses; she was dead wasn't she? He had said she was dead, hadn't he?

"Wonderful," said Tallulah again.

"Goodnight, Tallulah. I'll see you tomorrow."

The old crone didn't answer. If she was offended by his brusque manner, then so be it. He left her to her complaints and faced the street.

It was late November, and chilly. No balm in the night air, just the smell of tar from a freshly laid road, and grit in the wind.

Galloway pulled his jacket collar up around the back of his neck, and hurried off to the questionable refuge of Murphy's Bed and Breakfast.

In the foyer Tallulah turned her back on the cold and dark of the outside world, and shuffled back into the temple of dreams. It smelt so weary now: stale with use and age, like her own body. It was time to let natural processes take their toll; there was no point in letting things run beyond their allotted span. That was as true of buildings as of people. But the Elysium had to die as it had lived, in glory.

Respectfully, she drew back the red curtains that covered the portraits in the corridor that led from foyer to stalls. Barrymore, Irving: great names and great actors. Stained and faded pictures perhaps, but the memories were as sharp and as refreshing as spring

water. And in pride of place, the last of the line to be unveiled, a portrait of Constantia Lichfield. A face of transcendent beauty; a bone structure to make an anatomist weep.

She had been far too young for Lichfield of course, and that had been part of the tragedy of it. Lichfield the Svengali, a man twice her age, had been capable of giving his brilliant beauty everything she desired; fame, money, companionship. Everything but the gift she most required: life itself.

She'd died before she was yet twenty, a cancer in the breast. Taken so suddenly it was still difficult to believe she'd gone.

Tears brimmed in Tallulah's eyes as she remembered that lost and wasted genius. So many parts Constantia would have illuminated had she been spared. Cleopatra, Hedda, Rosalind, Electra…

But it wasn't to be. She'd gone, extinguished like a candle in a hurricane, and for those who were left behind life was a slow and joyless march through a cold land. There were mornings now, stirring to another dawn, when she would turn over and pray to die in her sleep.

The tears were quite blinding her now, she was awash. And oh dear, there was somebody behind her, probably Mr. Galloway back for something, and here was she, sobbing fit to burst, behaving like the silly old woman she knew he thought her to be. A young man like him, what did he understand about the pain of the years, the deep ache of irretrievable loss? That wouldn't come to him for a while yet. Sooner than he thought, but a while nevertheless. "Tallie," somebody said.

She knew who it was. Richard Walden Lichfield. She turned round and he was standing no more than six feet from her, as fine a figure of a man as ever she remembered him to be. He must be twenty years older than she was, but age didn't seem to bow him.

She felt ashamed of her tears.

"Tallie," he said kindly, "I know it's a little late, but I felt you'd surely want to say hello."

"Hello?"

The tears were clearing, and now she saw Lichfield's companion, standing a respectful foot or two behind him, partially obscured. The

figure stepped out of Lichfield's shadow and there was a luminous, fine-boned beauty Tallulah recognized as easily as her own reflection. Time broke in pieces, and reason deserted the world. Longed-for faces were suddenly back to fill the empty nights, and offer fresh hope to a life grown weary. Why should she argue with the evidence of her eyes?

It was Constantia, the radiant Constantia, who was looping her arm through Lichfield's and nodding gravely at Tallulah in greeting.

Dear, dead Constantia.

The rehearsal was called for nine-thirty the following morning. Diane Duvall made an entrance her customary half hour late. She looked as though she hadn't slept all night.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, her open vowels oozing down the aisle towards the stage.

Galloway was in no mood for foot-kissing.

"We've got an opening tomorrow," he snapped, “and everybody's been kept waiting by you."

"Oh really?" she fluttered, trying to be devastating. It was too early in the morning, and the effect fell on stony ground.

"OK, we're going from the top," Galloway announced, “and everybody please have your copies and a pen. I've got a list of cuts here and I want them rehearsed in by lunchtime. Ryan, have you got the prompt copy?" There was a hurried exchange with the ASM and an apologetic negative from Ryan.

"Well get it. And I don't want any complaints from anyone, it's too late in the day. Last night's run was a wake, not a performance. The cues took forever; the business was ragged. I'm going to cut, and it's not going to be very palatable."

It wasn't. The complaints came, warning or no, the arguments, the compromises, the sour faces and muttered insults. Galloway would have rather been hanging by his toes from a trapeze than maneuvering fourteen highly-strung people through a play two-thirds of them scarcely understood, and the other third couldn't give a monkey's about. It was nerve-wracking.

It was made worse because all the time he had the prickly sense of

being watched, though the auditorium was empty from Gods to front stalls. Maybe Lichfield had a spy hole somewhere, he thought, then condemned the idea as the first signs of budding paranoia.

At last, lunch.

Galloway knew where he'd find Diane, and he was prepared for the scene he had to play with her. Accusations, tears, reassurance, tears again, reconciliation. Standard format.

He knocked on the Star's door.

"Who is it?"

Was she crying already, or talking through a glass of something comforting.

"It's me."

"Oh."

"Can I come in?"

"Yes."

She had a bottle of vodka, good vodka, and a glass. No tears as yet.

"I'm useless, aren't I?" she said, almost as soon as he'd closed the door. Her eyes begged for contradiction. "Don't be silly," he hedged.

"I could never get the hang of Shakespeare," she pouted, as though it were the Bard's fault. "All those bloody words." The squall was on the horizon, he could see it mustering.

"It's all right," he lied, putting his arm around her. "You just need a little time."

Her face clouded.

"We open tomorrow," she said flatly. The point was difficult to refute.

"They'll tear me apart, won't they?"

He wanted to say no, but his tongue had a fit of honesty. "Yes. Unless -”

"I'll never work again, will I? Harry talked me into this, that damn half-witted Jew: good for my reputation, he said. Bound to give me a bit more clout, he said. What does he know? Takes his ten bloody per cent and leaves me holding the baby. I'm the one who looks the damn fool aren't I?"

At the thought of looking a fool, the storm broke. No light shower this: it was a cloudburst or nothing. He did what he could, but it was difficult. She was sobbing so loudly his pearls of wisdom were drowned out. So he kissed her a little, as any decent director was bound to do, and (miracle upon miracle) that seemed to do the trick. He applied the technique with a little more gusto, his hands straying to her breasts, ferreting under her blouse for her nipples and teasing them between thumb and forefinger.

It worked wonders. There were hints of sun between the clouds now; she sniffed and unbuckled his belt, letting his heat dry out the last of the rain. His fingers were finding the lacy edge of her panties, and she was sighing as he investigated her, gently but not too gently, insistent but never too insistent. Somewhere along the line she knocked over the vodka bottle but neither of them cared to stop and right it, so it sloshed on to the floor off the edge of the table, counter pointing her instructions, his gasps.

Then the bloody door opened, and a draught blew up between them, cooling the point at issue. Galloway almost turned round, then realized he was unbuckled, and stared instead into the mirror behind Diane to see the intruder's face. It was Lichfield. He was looking straight at Galloway, his face impassive. "I'm sorry, I should have knocked."

His voice was as smooth as whipped cream, betraying nary a tremor of embarrassment. Galloway wedged himself away, buckled up his belt and turned to Lichfield, silently cursing his burning cheeks.

"Yes… it would have been polite," he said.

"Again, my apologies. I wanted a word with-" his eyes, so deep-set they were unfathomable, were on Diane '- your star," he said.

Galloway could practically feel Diane's ego expand at the word. The approach confounded him: had Lichfield undergone a volte-face? Was he coming here, the repentant admirer, to kneel at the feet of greatness? "I would appreciate a word with the lady in private, if that were possible," the mellow voice went on. "Well, we were just -"

"Of course," Diane interrupted. "Just allow me a moment, would you?"

She was immediately on top of the situation, tears forgotten.

"I'll be just outside," said Lichfield, already taking his leave.

Before he had closed the door behind him Diane was in front of the mirror, tissue-wrapped finger skirting her eye to divert a rivulet of mascara.

"Well," she was cooing, “how lovely to have a well-wisher. Do you know who he is?"

"His name's Lichfield," Galloway told her. "He used to be a trustee of the theatre."

"Maybe he wants to offer me something."

"I doubt it."

"Oh don't be such a drag Terence," she snarled. "You just can't bear to have anyone else get any attention, can you?" "My mistake."

She peered at her eyes.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Fine."

"I'm sorry about before."

"Before?"

"You know."

"Oh… yes."

"I'll see you in the pub, eh?"

He was summarily dismissed apparently, his function as lover or confidante no longer required. In the chilly corridor outside the dressing room Lichfield was waiting patiently. Though the lights were better here than on the ill-lit stage, and he was closer now than he'd been the night before, Galloway could still not quite make out the face under the wide brim. There was something – what was the idea buzzing in his head? – something artificial about Lichfield's features.

The flesh of his face didn't move as interlocking system of muscle and tendon, it was too stiff, too pink, almost like scar-tissue.

"She's not quite ready," Galloway told him.

"She's a lovely woman," Lichfield purred.

"Yes."

"I don't blame you…"

"Um."

"She's no actress though."

"You're not going to interfere are you, Lichfield? I won't let you."

"Perish the thought."

The voyeuristic pleasure Lichfield had plainly taken in his embarrassment made Galloway less respectful than he'd been.

"I won't have you upsetting her -"

"My interests are your interests, Terence. All I want to do is see this production prosper, believe me. Am I likely, under those circumstances, to alarm your Leading Lady? I'll be as meek as a lamb, Terence." "Whatever you are," came the testy reply, "you're no lamb."

The smile appeared again on Lichfield's face, the tissue round his mouth barely stretching to accommodate his expression.

Galloway retired to the pub with that predatory sickle of teeth fixed in his mind, anxious for no reason he could focus upon.

In the mirrored cell of her dressing-room Diane Duvall was just about ready to play her scene. "You may come in now, Mr. Lichfield," she announced. He was in the doorway before the last syllable of his name had died on her lips.

"Miss Duvall," he bowed slightly in deference to her. She smiled; so courteous. "Will you please forgive my blundering in earlier on?"

She looked coy; it always melted men.

"Mr… Galloway-" she began.

"A very insistent young man, I think."

"Yes."

"Not above pressing his attentions on his Leading Lady, perhaps?"

She frowned a little, a dancing pucker where the plucked arches of her brows converged.

"I'm afraid so."

"Most unprofessional of him," Lichfield said. "But forgive me – an understandable ardour."

She moved upstage of him, towards the lights of her mirror, and turned, knowing they would backlight her hair more flatteringly.

"Well, Mr… Lichfield, what can I do for you?"

"This is frankly a delicate matter," said Lichfield. "The bitter fact is – how shall I put this? – your talents are not ideally suited to this production. Your style lacks delicacy."

There was a silence for two beats. She sniffed, thought about the inference of the remark, and then moved out of centre-stage towards the door. She didn't like the way this scene had begun. She was expecting an admirer, and instead she had a critic on her hands.

"Get out!" she said, her voice like slate.

"Miss Duvall -"

"You heard me."

"You're not comfortable as Viola, are you?" Lichfield continued, as though the star had said nothing. "None of your bloody business," she spat back.

"But it is. I saw the rehearsals. You were bland, unpersuasive. The comedy is flat, the reunion scene -it should break our hearts – is leaden."

"I don't need your opinion, thank you."

"You have no style -"

"Piss off."

"No presence and no style. I'm sure on the television you are radiance itself, but the stage requires a special truth, a soulfulness you, frankly, lack."

The scene was heating up. She wanted to hit him, but she couldn't find the proper motivation. She couldn't take this faded poseur seriously. He was more musical comedy than melodrama, with his neat grey gloves, and his neat grey cravat. Stupid, waspish queen, what did he know about acting?

"Get out before I call the Stage Manager," she said, but he stepped between her and the door. A rape scene? Was that what they were playing? Had he got the hots for her? God forbid.

"My wife," he was saying, “has played Viola -”

"Good for her."

"- and she feels she could breathe a little more life into the role than you."

"We open tomorrow." she found herself replying, as though defending her presence. Why the hell was she trying to reason with him; barging in here and making these terrible remarks. Maybe because she was just a little afraid. His breath, close to her now, smelt of expensive chocolate.

"She knows the role by heart."

"The part's mine. And I'm doing it. I'm doing it even if I'm the worst Viola in theatrical history, all right?" She was trying to keep her composure, but it was difficult. Something about him made her nervous. It wasn't violence she feared from him: but she feared something.

"I'm afraid I have already promised the part to my wife."

"What?" she goggled at his arrogance.

"And Constantia will play the role."

She laughed at the name. Maybe this was high comedy after all. Something from Sheridan or Wilde, arch, catty stuff. But he spoke with such absolute certainty. Constantia will play the role; as if it was all cut and dried. "I'm not discussing this any longer, Buster, so if your wife wants to play Viola she'll have to do it in the fucking street. All

right?"

"She opens tomorrow."

"Are you deaf, or stupid, or both?"

Control, an inner voice told her, you're overplaying, losing your grip on the scene. Whatever scene this is. He stepped towards her, and the mirror lights caught the face beneath the brim full on. She hadn't looked carefully enough when he first made his appearance: now she saw the deeply-etched lines, the gougings around his eyes and his mouth. It wasn't flesh, she was sure of it. He was wearing latex appliances, and they were badly glued in place. Her hand all but twitched with the desire to snatch at it and uncover his real face.

Of course. That was it. The scene she was playing: the Unmasking.

"Let's see what you look like," she said, and her hand was at his cheek before he could stop her, his smile spreading wider as she attacked. This is what he wants, she thought, but it was too late for regrets or apologies. Her fingertips had found the line of the mask at the edge of his eye-socket, and curled round to take a better hold. She yanked. The thin veil of latex came away, and his true physiognomy was exposed for the world to see. Diane tried to back away, but his hand was in her hair. All she could do was look up into that all-but fleshless face. A few withered strands of muscle curled here and there, and a hint of a beard hung from a leathery flap at his throat, but all living tissue had long since decayed. Most of his face was simply bone: stained and worn.

"I was not," said the skull, “embalmed. Unlike Constantia."

The explanation escaped Diane. She made no sound of protest, which the scene would surely have justified. All she could summon was a whimper as his hand-hold tightened, and he hauled her head back.

"We must make a choice, sooner or later," said Lichfield, his breath smelling less like chocolate than profound putrescence, “between serving ourselves and serving our art."

She didn't quite understand.

"The dead must choose more carefully than the living. We cannot waste our breath, if you'll excuse the phrase, on less than the purest delights. You don't want art, I think. Do you?"

She shook her head, hoping to God that was the expected response.

"You want the life of the body, not the life of the imagination. And you may have it."

"Thank… you."

"If you want it enough, you may have it."

Suddenly his hand, which had been pulling on her hair so painfully, was cupped behind her head, and bringing her lips up to meet his. She would have screamed then, as his rotting mouth fastened itself on to hers, but his greeting was so insistent it quite took her breath away.

Ryan found Diane on the floor of her dressing-room a few minutes before two. It was difficult to work out what had happened. There was no sign of a wound of any kind on her head or body, nor was she quite dead. She seemed to be in a coma of some kind. She had perhaps slipped, and struck her head as she fell. Whatever the cause, she was out for the count.

They were hours away from a Final Dress Rehearsal and Viola was in an ambulance, being taken into Intensive Care.

"The sooner they knock this place down, the better," said Hammersmith. He'd been drinking during office hours, something Galloway had never seen him do before. The whisky bottle stood on his desk beside a half-full glass. There were glass-marks ringing his accounts, and his hand had a bad dose of the shakes.

"What's the news from the hospital?"

"She's a beautiful woman," he said, staring at the glass. Galloway could have sworn he was on the verge of tears. "Hammersmith? How is she?"

"She's in a coma. But her condition is stable."

"That's something, I suppose."

Hammersmith stared up at Galloway, his erupting brows knitted in anger.

"You runt," he said, “you were screwing her, weren't you? Fancy yourself like that, don't you? Well, let me tell you something, Diane Duvall is worth a dozen of you. A dozen!"

"Is that why you let this last production go on, Hammersmith? Because you'd seen her, and you wanted to get your hot little hands on her?"

"You wouldn't understand. You've got your brain in your pants." He seemed genuinely offended by the interpretation Galloway had put on his admiration for Miss Duvall.

"All right, have it your way. We still have no Viola."

"That's why I'm cancelling," said Hammersmith, slowing down to savour the moment.

It had to come. Without Diane Duvall, there would be no Twelfth Night; and maybe it was better that way. A knock on the door.

"W ho the fuck's that?" said Hammersmith softly. "Come."

It was Lichfield. Galloway was almost glad to see that strange, scarred face. Though he had a lot of questions to ask of Lichfield, about the state he'd left Diane in, about their conversation together, it wasn't an interview he was willing to conduct in front of Hammersmith. Besides, any half-formed accusations he might have had were countered by the man's presence here. If Lichfield had attempted violence on Diane, for whatever reason, was it likely that he would come back so soon, so smilingly?

"Who are you?" Hammersmith demanded.

"Richard Walden Lichfield."

"I'm none the wiser."

"I used to be a trustee of the Elysium."

"Oh."

"I make it my business -" "What do you want?" Hammersmith broke in, irritated by Lichfield's poise. "I hear the production is in jeopardy," Lichfield replied, unruffled.

"No jeopardy," said Hammersmith, allowing himself a twitch at the corner of his mouth. "No jeopardy at all, because there's no show. It's been cancelled."

"Oh?" Lichfield looked at Galloway.

"Is this with your consent?" he asked.

"He has no say in the matter; I have sole right of cancellation if circumstances dictate it; it's in his contract. The theatre is closed as of today: it will not reopen."

"Yes it will," said Lichfield.

"What?" Hammersmith stood up behind his desk, and Galloway realized he'd never seen the man standing before. He was very short.

"We will play Twelfth Night as advertised," Lichfield purred. "My wife has kindly agreed to understudy the part of Viola in place of Miss Duvall."

Hammersmith laughed, a coarse, butcher's laugh. It died on his lips however, as the office was suffused with lavender, and Constantia Lichfield made her entrance, shimmering in silk and fur. She looked as perfect as the day she died: even Hammersmith held his breath and his silence at the sight of her.

"Our new Viola," Lichfield announced.

After a moment Hammersmith found his voice. "This woman can't step in at half a day's notice." "Why not?" said Galloway, not taking his eyes off the woman. Lichfield was a lucky man; Constantia was an extraordinary beauty. He scarcely dared draw breath in her presence for fear she'd vanish.

Then she spoke. The lines were from Act V, Scene I: "If nothing lets to make us happy both. But this my masculine usurp'd attire, do not embrace me till each circumstance. Of place, time, fortune, do cohere and jump. That I am Viola."

The voice was light and musical, but it seemed to resound in her body, filling each phrase with an undercurrent of suppressed passion.

And that face. It was wonderfully alive, the features playing the story of her speech with delicate economy. She was enchanting.

"I'm sorry," said Hammersmith, “but there are rules and regulations about this sort of thing. Is she Equity?" "No," said Lichfield.

"Well you see, it's impossible. The union strictly precludes this kind of thing. They'd flay us alive." "What's it to you, Hammersmith?" said Galloway. "What the fuck do you care? You'll never need set foot in a

theatre again once this place is demolished."

"My wife has watched the rehearsals. She is word perfect."

"It could be magic," said Galloway, his enthusiasm firing up with every moment he looked at Constantia. "You're risking the Union, Galloway," Hammersmith chided.

"I'll take that risk."

"As you say, it's nothing to me. But if a little bird was to tell them, you'd have egg on your face." "Hammersmith: give her a chance. Give all of us a chance. If Equity blacks me, that's my look-out." Hammersmith sat down again.

"Nobody'll come, you know that, don't you? Diane Duvall was a star; they would have sat through your turgid production to see her, Galloway. But an unknown… Well, it's your funeral. Go ahead and do it, I wash my hands of the whole thing. It's on your head Galloway, remember that. I hope they flay you for it."

"Thank you," said Lichfield. "Most kind." Hammersmith began to rearrange his desk, to give more prominence to the bottle and the glass. The interview was over: he wasn't interested in these butterifies any longer. "Go away," he said. "Just go away."

"I have one or two requests to make," Lichfield told Galloway as they left the office. "Alterations to the production which would enhance my wife's performance."

"What are they?"

"For Constantia's comfort, I would ask that the lighting levels be taken down substantially. She's simply not accustomed to performing under such hot, bright lights."

"Very well."

"I'd also request that we install a row of footlights."

"Footlights?"

"An odd requirement, I realize, but she feels much happier with footlights."

"They tend to dazzle the actors," said Galloway. "It becomes difficult to see the audience."

"Nevertheless… I have to stipulate their installation."

"OK."

"Thirdly – I would ask that all scenes involving kissing, embracing or otherwise touching Constantia be re-directed to remove every instance of physical contact whatsoever."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"For God's sake why?"

"My wife needs no business to dramatize the working of the heart, Terence."

That curious intonation on the word 'heart'. Working of the heart.

Galloway caught Constantia's eye for the merest of moments. It was like being blessed.

"Shall we introduce our new Viola to the company?" Lichfield suggested.

"Why not?"

The trio went into the theatre.

The re-arranging of the blocking and the business to exclude any physical contact was simple. And though the rest of the cast were initially wary of their new colleague, her unaffected manner and her natural grace soon had them at her feet. Besides, her presence meant that the show would go on.

At six, Galloway called a break, announcing that they'd begin the Dress at eight, and telling them to go out and enjoy themselves for an hour or so. The company went their ways, buzzing with a new-found enthusiasm for the production. What had looked like a shambles half a day earlier now seemed to be shaping up quite well. There were a thousand things to be sniped at, of course: technical shortcomings, costumes that fitted badly, directorial foibles. All par for the course. In fact, the actors were happier than they'd been in a good while. Even Ed Cunningham was not above passing a compliment or two.

Lichfield found Tallulah in the Green Room, tidying.

"Tonight… "Yes, sir."

"You must not be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Tallulah replied. What a thought. As if-"

"There may be some pain, which I regret. For you, indeed for all of us."

"I understand."

"Of course you do. You love the theatre as I love it: you know the paradox of this profession. To play life. ah, Tallulah, to play life… what a curious thing it is. Sometimes I wonder, you know, how long I can keep up the illusion."

"It's a wonderful performance," she said.

"Do you think so? Do you really think so?" He was encouraged by her favourable review. It was so gaffing, to have to pretend all the time; to fake the flesh, the breath, the look of life. Grateful for Tallulah's opinion, he reached for her.

"Would you like to die, Tallulah?"

"Does it hurt?"

"Scarcely at all."

"It would make me very happy."

"And so it should."

His mouth covered her mouth, and she was dead in less than a minute, conceding happily to his inquiring tongue. He laid her out on the threadbare couch and locked the door of the Green Room with her own key. She'd cool easily in the chill of the room, and be up and about again by the time the audience arrived.

At six-fifteen Diane Duvall got out of a taxi at the front of the Elysium. It was well dark, a windy November night, but she felt fine; nothing could depress tonight. Not the dark, not the cold.

Unseen, she made her way past the posters that bore her face and name, and through the empty auditorium to her dressing-room. There, smoking his way through a pack of cigarettes, she found the object of her affection. "Terry."

She posed in the doorway for a moment, letting the fact of her reappearance sink in. He went quite white at the sight of her, so she pouted a little. It wasn't easy to pout. There was a stiffness in the muscles of her face but she carried off the effect to her satisfaction.

Galloway was lost for words. Diane looked ill, no two ways about it, and if she'd left the hospital to take up her part in the Dress Rehearsal he was going to have to convince her otherwise. She was wearing no make-up, and her ash blonde hair needed a wash.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, as she closed the door behind her.

"Unfinished business," she said.

"Listen… I've got something to tell you…

God, this was going to be messy. "We've found a replacement, in the show." She looked at him blankly. He hurried on, tripping over his own words, "We thought you were out of commission, I mean, not permanently, but, you know, for the opening at least…"

"Don't worry," she said. His jaw dropped a little. "Don't worry?" "What's it to me?"

"You said you came back to finish -" He stopped. She was unbuttoning the top of her dress.

She's not serious, he thought, she can't be serious. Sex? Now?

"I've done a lot of thinking in the last few hours," she said as she shimmied the crumpled dress over her hips, let it fall, and stepped out of it. She was wearing a white bra, which she tried, unsuccessfully, to unhook. "I've decided I don't care about the theatre. Help me, will you?"

She turned round and presented her back to him. Automatically he unhooked the bra, not really analysing whether he wanted this or not. It seemed to be a fait accompli. She'd come back to finish what they'd been interrupted doing, simple as that. And despite the bizarre noises she was making in the back of her throat, and the glassy look in her eyes, she was still an attractive woman. She turned again, and Galloway stared at the fullness of her breasts, paler than he'd remembered them, but lovely. His trousers were becoming uncomfortably tight, and her performance was only worsening his situation, the way she was grinding her hips like the rawest of Soho

strippers, running her hands between her legs.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I've made up my mind. All I really want…"

She put her hands, so recently at her groin, on his face. They were icy cold.

"All I really want is you. I can't have sex and the stage. There comes a time in everyone's life when decisions have to be made."

She licked her lips. There was no film of moisture left on her mouth when her tongue had passed over it. "The accident made me think, made me analyse what it is I really care about. And frankly -" She was unbuckling his belt."- I don't give a shit -"

Now the zip.

"- about this, or any other fucking play."

His trousers fell down.

"- I'll show you what I care about."

She reached into his briefs, and clasped him. Her cold hand somehow made the touch sexier. He laughed, closing his eyes as she pulled his briefs down to the middle of his thigh and knelt at his feet.

She was as expert as ever, her throat open like a drain. Her mouth was somewhat drier than usual, her tongue scouring him, but the sensations drove him wild. It was so good, he scarcely noticed the ease with which she devoured him, taking him deeper than she'd ever managed previously, using every trick she knew to goad him higher and higher. Slow and deep, then picking up speed until he almost came, then slowing again until the need passed. He was completely at her mercy.

He opened his eyes to watch her at work. She was skewering herself upon him, face in rapture. "God," he gasped, "That is so good. Oh yes, oh yes."

Her face didn't even flicker in response to his words, she just continued to work at him soundlessly. She wasn't making her usual noises, the small grunts of satisfaction, the heavy breathing through the nose. She just ate his flesh in absolute silence.

He held his breath a moment, while an idea was born in his belly. The bobbing head bobbed on, eyes closed, lips clamped around his member, utterly engrossed. Half a minute passed; a minute; a minute and a half. And now his belly was full of terrors.

She wasn't breathing. She was giving this matchless blow-job because she wasn't stopping, even for a moment, to inhale or exhale.

Calloway felt his body go rigid, while his erection wilted in her throat. She didn't falter in her labour; the relentless pumping continued at his groin even as his mind formed the unthinkable thought: She's dead.

She has me in her mouth, in her cold mouth, and she's dead. That's why she'd come back, got up off her mortuary slab and come back. She was eager to finish what she'd started, no longer caring about the play, or her usurper. It was this act she valued, this act alone. She'd chosen to perform it for eternity.

Galloway could do nothing with the realization but stare down like a damn fool while this corpse gave him head. Then it seemed she sensed his horror. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. How could he ever have mistaken that dead stare for life? Gently, she withdrew his shrunken manhood from between her lips.

"What is it?" she asked, her fluting voice still affecting life.

"You… you're not… breathing."

Her face fell. She let him go.

"Oh darling," she said, letting all pretence to life disappear, "I'm not so good at playing the part, am I?" Her voice was a ghost's voice: thin, forlorn. Her skin, which he had thought so flatteringly pale was, on second view, a waxen white.

"You are dead?" he said.

"I'm afraid so. Two hours ago: in my sleep. But I had to come, Terry; so much unfinished business. I made my choice. You should be flattered. You are flattered, aren't you?"

She stood up and reached into her handbag, which she'd left beside the mirror. Galloway looked at the door, trying to make his limbs work, but they were inert. Besides, he had his trousers round his ankles. Two steps and he'd fall flat on his face.

She turned back on him, with something silver and sharp in her hand. Try as he might, he couldn't get a focus on it. But whatever it was, she meant it for him.

Since the building of the new Crematorium in 1934, one humiliation had come after another for the cemetery. The tombs had been raided for lead coffin-linings, the stones overturned and smashed; it was fouled by dogs and graffiti. Very few mourners now came to tend the graves. The generations had dwindled, and the small number of people who might still have had a loved one buried there were too infirm to risk the throttled walkways, or too tender to bear looking at such vandalism.

It had not always been so. There were illustrious and influential families interred behind the marble fa3ades of the Victorian mausoleums. Founder fathers, local industrialists and dignitaries, any and all who had done the town proud by their efforts. The body of the actress Constantia Lichfield had been buried here ('Until the Day Break and the Shadows Flee Away'), though her grave was almost unique in the attention some secret admirer still paid to it. Nobody was watching that night, it was too bitter for lovers. Nobody saw Charlotte Hancock open the door of her sepulcher, with the beating wings of pigeons applauding her vigour as she shambled out to meet the moon. Her husband Gerard was with her, he less fresh than she, having been dead thirteen years longer. Joseph Jardine, en famille, was not far behind the Hancocks, as was Marriott Fletcher, and Anne Snell, and the Peacock Brothers; the list went on and on. In one corner, Alfred Crawshaw (Captain in the 17th Lancers), was helping his lovely wife Emma from the rot of their bed. Everywhere faces pressed at the cracks of the tomb lids – was that not Kezia Reynolds with her child, who'd lived just a day, in her arms? And Martin van de Linde (the Memory of the Just is Blessed) whose wife had never been found; Rosa and Selina Goldfinch: upstanding women both; and Thomas Jerrey, and -Too many names to mention. Too many states of decay to describe. Sufficient to say they rose: their burial finery fly born, their faces stripped of all but the foundation of beauty. Still they came, swinging open the back gate of the cemetery and threading their way across the wasteland towards the Elysium. In the distance, the sound of traffic. Above, a jet roared in to land. One of the Peacock brothers, staring up at the winking giant as it passed over, missed his footing and fell on his face, shattering his jaw. They picked him up fondly, and escorted him on his way. There was no harm done; and what would a Resurrection be without a few laughs?

So the show went on.

"If music be the food of love, play on, Give me excess of it; that, surfeiting, The appetite may sicken and so die -" Galloway could not be found at Curtain; but Ryan had instructions from Hammersmith (through the ubiquitous Mr. Lichfield) to take the show up with or without the Director.

"He'll be upstairs, in the Gods," said Lichfield. "In fact, I think I can see him from here."

"Is he smiling?" asked Eddie.

"Grinning from ear to ear."

"Then he's pissed."

The actors laughed. There was a good deal of laughter that night. The show was running smoothly, and though they couldn't see the audience over the glare of the newly-installed footlights they could feel the waves of love and delight pouring out of the auditorium. The actors were coming off stage elated.

"They're all sitting in the Gods," said Eddie, "but your friends, Mr. Lichfield, do an old ham good. They're quiet of course, but such big smiles on their faces."

Act I, Scene II; and the first entrance of Constantia Lichfield as Viola was met with spontaneous applause. Such applause. Like the hollow roll of snare drums, like the brittle beating of a thousand sticks on a thousand stretched skins. Lavish, wanton applause.

And, my God, she rose to the occasion. She began the play as she meant to go on, giving her whole heart to the role, not needing physicality to communicate the depth of her feelings, but speaking the poetry with such intelligence and passion the merest flutter of her hand was worth more than a hundred grander gestures. After that first scene her every entrance was met with the same applause from the audience, followed by almost reverential silence. Backstage, a kind of buoyant confidence had set in. The whole company sniffed the success; a success which had been snatched miraculously from the jaws of disaster.

There again! Applause! Applause!

In his office, Hammersmith dimly registered the brittle din of adulation through a haze of booze. He was in the act of pouring his eighth drink when the door opened. He glanced up for a moment and

registered that the visitor was that upstart Calloway. Come to gloat I daresay, Hammersmith thought, come to tell me how wrong I was.

"What do you want?"

The punk didn't answer. From the corner of his eye Hammersmith had an impression of a broad, bright smile on Galloway's face. Self-satisfied half-wit, coming in here when a man was in mourning.

"I suppose you've heard?"

The other grunted.

"She died," said Hammersmith, beginning to cry. "She died a few hours ago, without regaining consciousness. I haven't told the actors. Didn't seem worth it."

Galloway said nothing in reply to this news. Didn't the bastard care? Couldn't he see that this was the end of the world? The woman was dead. She'd died in the bowels of the Elysium. There'd be official enquiries made, the insurance would be examined, a post-mortem, an inquest: it would reveal too much.

He drank deeply from his glass, not bothering to look at Galloway again.

"Your career'll take a dive after this, son. It won't just be me: oh dear no."

Still Galloway kept his silence.

"Don't you care?" Hammersmith demanded.

There was silence for a moment, then Galloway responded. "I don't give a shit."

"Jumped up little stage-manager, that's all you are. That's all any of you fucking directors are! One good review and you're God's gift to art. Well let me set you straight about that -"

He looked at Galloway, his eyes, swimming in alcohol, having difficulty focusing. But he got there eventually. Galloway, the dirty bugger, was naked from the waist down. He was wearing his shoes and his socks, but no trousers or briefs. His self-exposure would have been comical, but for the expression on his face. The man had gone mad: his eyes were rolling around uncontrollably, saliva and snot ran

from mouth and nose, his tongue hung out like the tongue of a panting dog.

Hammersmith put his glass down on his blotting pad, and looked at the worst part. There was blood on Galloway's shirt, a trail of it which led up his neck to his left ear, from which protruded the end of Diane Duvall's nail-file. It had been driven deep into Galloway's brain. The man was surely dead.

But he stood, spoke, walked.

From the theatre, there rose another round of applause, muted by distance. It wasn't a real sound somehow; it came from another world, a place where emotions ruled. It was a world Hammersmith had always felt excluded from. He'd never been much of an actor, though God knows he'd tried, and the two plays he'd penned were, he knew, execrable. Book-keeping was his forte, and he'd used it to stay as close to the stage as he could, hating his own lack of art as much as he resented that skill in others.

The applause died, and as if taking a cue from an unseen prompter, Galloway came at him. The mask he wore was neither comic nor tragic, it was blood and laughter together. Cowering, Hammersmith was cornered behind his desk. Galloway leapt on to it (he looked so ridiculous, shirt-tails and balls flip-flapping) and seized Hammersmith by the tie.

"Philistine," said Galloway, never now to know Hammersmith's heart, and broke the man's neck – snap! – while below the applause began again.

"Do not embrace me till each circumstance of place, time, fortune, do cohere and jump. That I am Viola."

From Constantia's mouth the lines were a revelation. It was almost as though this Twelfth Night were a new play, and the part of Viola had been written for Constantia Lichfield alone. The actors who shared the stage with her felt their egos shriveling in the face of such a gift.

The last act continued to its bitter-sweet conclusion, the audience as enthralled as ever to judge by their breathless attention.

The Duke spoke: "Give me thy hand; and let me see thee in thy woman's weeds."

In the rehearsal the invitation in the line had been ignored: no-one was to touch this Viola, much less take her hand. But in the heat of the performance such taboos were forgotten. Possessed by the passion of the moment the actor reached for Constantia. She, forgetting the taboo in her turn, reached to answer his touch.

In the wings Lichfield breathed 'no' under his breath, but his order wasn't heard. The Duke grasped Viola's hand in his, life and death holding court together under this painted sky.

It was a chilly hand, a hand without blood in its veins, or a blush in its skin.

But here it was as good as alive.

They were equals, the living and the dead, and nobody could find just cause to part them.

In the wings, Lichfield sighed, and allowed himself a smile. He'd feared that touch, feared it would break the spell. But Dionysus was with them tonight. All would be well; he felt it in his bones.

The act drew to a close, and Malvolio, still trumpeting his threats, even in defeat, was carted off. One by one the company exited, leaving the clown to wrap up the play.

"A great while ago the world began. With hey, ho, the wind and the rain, But that's all one, our play is done. And we'll strive to please you every day."

The scene darkened to blackout, and the curtain descended. From the gods rapturous applause erupted, that same rattling, hollow applause. The company, their faces shining with the success of the Dress Rehearsal, formed behind the curtain for the bow. The curtain rose: the applause mounted.

In the wings, Galloway joined Lichfield. He was dressed now: and he'd washed the blood off his neck. "Well, we have a brilliant success," said the skull. "It does seem a pity that this company should be dissolved so soon."

"It does," said the corpse.

The actors were shouting into the wings now, calling for Galloway to join them. They were applauding him, encouraging him to show his face.

He put a hand on Lichfield's shoulder.

"We'll go together, sir," he said.

"No, no, I couldn't."

"You must. It's your triumph as much as mine." Lichfield nodded, and they went out together to take their bows beside the company.

In the wings Tallulah was at work. She felt restored after her sleep in the Green Room. So much unpleasantness had gone, taken with her life. She no longer suffered the aches in her hip, or the creeping neuralgia in her scalp. There was no longer the necessity to draw breath through pipes encrusted with seventy years' muck, or to rub the backs of her hands to get the circulation going; not even the need to blink. She laid the fires with a new strength, pressing the detritus of past productions into use: old backdrops, props, costuming. When she had enough combustibles heaped, she struck a match and set the flame to them. The Elysium began to burn. Over the applause, somebody was shouting: "Marvelous, sweethearts, Marvelous."

It was Diane's voice, they all recognized it even though they couldn't quite see her. She was staggering down the centre aisle towards the stage, making quite a fool of herself.

"Silly bitch," said Eddie.

"W hoops," said Galloway.

He was at the edge of the stage now, haranguing him.

"Got all you wanted now, have you? This your new lady-love is it? Is it?"

He was trying to clamber up, her hands gripping the hot metal hoods of the footlights. Her skin began to singe: the fat was well and truly in the fire.

"For God's sake, somebody stop her," said Eddie. But she didn't seem to feel the searing of her hands; she just laughed in his face. The smell of burning flesh wafted up from the footlights. The company broke rank, triumph forgotten.

Somebody yelled: "Kill the lights!"

A beat, and then the stage lights were extinguished. Diane fell back,

her hands smoking. One of the cast fainted, another ran into the wings to be sick. Somewhere behind them, they could hear the faint crackle of flames, but they had other calls on their attention.

With the footlights gone, they could see the auditorium more clearly. The stalls were empty, but the Balcony and the gods were full to bursting with eager admirers. Every row was packed, and every available inch of aisle space thronged with audience. Somebody up there started clapping again, alone for a few moments before the wave of applause began afresh. But now few of the company took pride in it.

Even from the stage, even with exhausted and light dazzled eyes, it was obvious that no man, woman or child in that adoring crowd was alive. They waved fine silk handkerchiefs at the players in rotted fists, some of them beat a tattoo on the seats in front of them, most just clapped, bone on bone.

Galloway smiled, bowed deeply, and received their admiration with gratitude. In all his fifteen years of work in the theatre he had never found an audience so appreciative.

Bathing in the love of their admirers, Constantia and Richard Lichfield joined hands and walked down-stage to take another bow, while the living actors retreated in horror.

They began to yell and pray, they let out howls, they ran about like discovered adulterers in a farce. But, like the farce, there was no way out of the situation. There were bright flames tickling the roof-joists, and billows of canvas cascaded down to right and left as the flies caught fire. In front, the dead: behind, death. Smoke was beginning to thicken the air, it was impossible to see where one was going. Somebody was wearing a toga of burning canvas, and reciting screams. Someone else was wielding a fire extinguisher against the inferno. All useless: all tired business, badly managed. As the roof began to give, lethal falls of timber and girder silenced most.

In the Gods, the audience had more or less departed. They were ambling back to their graves long before the fire department appeared, their cerements and their faces lit by the glow of the fire as they glanced over their shoulders to watch the Elysium perish. It had been a fine show, and they were happy to go home, content for another while to gossip in the dark.

The fire burned through the night, despite the never less than

gallant efforts of the fire department to put it out. By four in the morning the fight was given up as lost, and the conflagration allowed its head. It had done with the Elysium by dawn.

In the ruins the remains of several persons were discovered, most of the bodies in states that defied easy identification. Dental records were consulted, and one corpse was found to be that of Giles Hammersmith (Administrator), another that of Ryan Xavier (Stage Manager) and, most shockingly, a third that of Diane Duvall. "Star of The Love Child burned to death', read the tabloids. She was forgotten in a week.

There were no survivors. Several bodies were simply never found.

They stood at the side of the motorway, and watched the cars careering through the night.

Lichfield was there of course, and Constantia, radiant as ever. Galloway had chosen to go with them, so had Eddie, and Tallulah. Three or four others had also joined the troupe.

It was the first night of their freedom, and here they were on the open road, travelling players. The smoke alone had killed Eddie, but there were a few more serious injuries amongst their number, sustained in the fire. Burned bodies, broken limbs. But the audience they would play for in the future would forgive them their pretty mutilations. "There are lives lived for love," said Lichfield to his new company, “and lives lived for art. We happy band have chosen the latter persuasion."

"There was a ripple of applause amongst the actors.

"To you, who have never died, may I say: welcome to the world!"

Laughter: further applause.

The lights of the cars racing north along the motorway threw the company into silhouette. They looked, to all intents and purposes, like living men and women. But then wasn't that the trick of their craft? To imitate life so well the illusion was indistinguishable from the real thing? And their new public, awaiting them in mortuaries, churchyards and chapels of rest, would appreciate the skill more than most. Who better to applaud the sham of passion and pain they would perform than the dead, who had experienced such feelings, and thrown them off at last? The dead. They needed entertainment no less than the living; and they were a sorely neglected market. Not that this

company would perform for money, they would play for the love of their art, Lichfield had made that clear from the outset. No more service would be done to Apollo.

"Now," he said, “which road shall we take, north or south?"

"North," said Eddie. "My mother's buried in Glasgow, she died before I ever played professionally. I'd like her to see me."

"North it is, then," said Lichfield. "Shall we go and find ourselves some transport?"

He led the way towards the motorway restaurant, its neon flickering fitfully, keeping the night at light's length. The colours were theatrically bright: scarlet, lime, cobalt, and a wash of white that splashed out of the windows on to the car park where they stood. The automatic doors hissed as a traveler emerged, bearing gifts of hamburgers and cake to the child in the back of his car.

"Surely some friendly driver will find a niche for us," said Lichfield.

"All of us?" said Galloway.

"A truck will do; beggars can't be too demanding," said Lichfield. "And we are beggars now: subject to the whim of our patrons."

"We can always steal a car," said Tallulah.

"No need for theft, except in extremity," Lichfield said. "Constantia and I will go ahead and find a chauffeur." He took his wife's hand.

"Nobody refuses beauty," he said.

"What do we do if anyone asks us what we're doing here?" asked Eddie nervously. He wasn't used to this role; he needed reassurance.

Lichfield turned towards the company, his voice booming in the night: "What do you do?" he said, "Play life, of course! And smile!"

VI: IN THE HILLS, THE CITIES

It wasn't until the first week of the Yugoslavian trip that Mick discovered what a political bigot he'd chosen as a lover. Certainly, he'd been warned. One of the queens at the Baths had told him Judd was to the Right of Attila the Hun, but the man had been one of Judd's ex-affairs, and Mick had presumed there was more spite than perception in the character assassination.

If only he'd listened. Then he wouldn't be driving along an interminable road in a Volkswagen that suddenly seemed the size of a coffin, listening to Judd's views on Soviet expansionism. Jesus, he was so boring. He didn't converse, he lectured, and endlessly. In Italy the sermon had been on the way the Communists had exploited the peasant vote. Now, in Yugoslavia, Judd had really warmed to his theme, and Mick was just about ready to take a hammer to his self-opinionated head.

It wasn't that he disagreed with everything Judd said. Some of the arguments (the ones Mick understood) seemed quite sensible. But then, what did he know? He was a dance teacher. Judd was a journalist, a professional pundit. He felt, like most journalists Mick had encountered, that he was obliged to have an opinion on everything under the sun. Especially politics; that was the best trough to wallow in. You could get your snout, eyes, head and front hooves in that mess of muck and have a fine old time splashing around. It was an inexhaustible subject to devour, a swill with a little of everything in it, because everything, according to Judd, was political. The arts were political. Sex was political. Religion, commerce, gardening, eating, drinking and farting – all political.

Jesus, it was mind-blowingly boring; killingly, love deadeningly boring.

Worse still, Judd didn't seem to notice how bored Mick had become, or if he noticed, he didn't care. He just rambled on, his arguments getting windier and windier, his sentences lengthening with every mile they drove. Judd, Mick had decided, was a selfish bastard, and as soon as their honeymoon was over he'd part with the guy.

It was not until their trip, that endless, motiveless caravan through the graveyards of mid-European culture, that Judd realized what a political lightweight he had in Mick. The guy showed precious little interest in the economics or the politics of the countries they passed

through. He registered indifference to the full facts behind the Italian situation, and yawned, yes, yawned when he tried (and failed) to debate the Russian threat to world peace. He had to face the bitter truth: Mick was a queen; there was no other word for him. All right, perhaps he didn't mince or wear jewellery to excess, but he was a queen nevertheless, happy to wallow in a dream-world of early Renaissance frescoes and Yugoslavian icons. The complexities, the contradictions, even the agonies that made those cultures blossom and wither were just tiresome to him. His mind was no deeper than his looks; he was a well-groomed nobody. Some honeymoon.

The road south from Belgrade to Novi Pazar was, by Yugoslavian standards, a good one. There were fewer pot-holes than on many of the roads they'd travelled, and it was relatively straight. The town of Novi Pazar lay in the valley of the River Raska, south of the city named after the river. It wasn't an area particularly popular with the tourists. Despite the good road it was still inaccessible, and lacked sophisticated amenities; but Mick was determined to see the monastery at Sopocani, to the west of the town and after some bitter argument, he'd won.

The journey had proved uninspiring. On either side of the road the cultivated fields looked parched and dusty. The summer had been unusually hot, and droughts were affecting many of the villages. Crops had failed, and livestock had been prematurely slaughtered to prevent them dying of malnutrition. There was a defeated look about the few faces they glimpsed at the roadside. Even the children had dour expressions; brows as heavy as the stale heat that hung over the valley.

Now, with the cards on the table after a row at Belgrade, they drove in silence most of the time; but the straight road, like most straight roads, invited dispute. When the driving was easy, the mind rooted for something to keep it engaged. What better than a fight?

"Why the hell do you want to see this damn monastery?" Judd demanded.

It was an unmistakable invitation.

"We've come all this way…" Mick tried to keep the tone conversational. He wasn't in the mood for an argument. "More fucking Virgins, is it?"

Keeping his voice as even as he could, Mick picked up the Guide

and read aloud from it…"there, some of the greatest works of Serbian painting can still be seen and enjoyed, including what many commentators agree to be the enduring masterpiece of the Raska school: "The Dormition of the Virgin."'

Silence.

Then Judd: "I'm up to here with churches."

"It's a masterpiece."

"They're all masterpieces according to that bloody book."

Mick felt his control slipping.

"Two and a half hours at most -"

"I told you, I don't want to see another church; the smell of the places makes me sick. Stale incense, old sweat and lies…"

"It's a short detour; then we can get back on to the road and you can give me another lecture on farming subsidies in the Sandzak."

"I'm just trying to get some decent conversation going instead of this endless tripe about Serbian fucking masterpieces -"

"Stop the car!"

"What?"

"Stop the car!"

Judd pulled the Volkswagen into the side of the road. Mick got out.

The road was hot, but there was a slight breeze. He took a deep breath, and wandered into the middle of the road. Empty of traffic and of pedestrians in both directions. In every direction, empty. The hills shimmered in the heat off the fields. There were wild poppies growing in the ditches. Mick crossed the road, squatted on his haunches and picked one.

Behind him he heard the VW's door slam.

"What did you stop us for?" Judd said. His voice was edgy, still hoping for that argument, begging for it. Mick stood up, playing with the poppy. It was close to seeding, late in the season. The petals fell from the receptacle as soon as he touched them, little splashes of red

fluttering down on to the grey tarmac.

"I asked you a question," Judd said again.

Mick looked round. Judd was standing the far side of the car, his brows a knitted line of burgeoning anger. But handsome; oh yes; a face that made women weep with frustration that he was gay. A heavy black moustache (perfectly trimmed) and eyes you could watch forever, and never see the same light in them twice. Why in God 's name, thought Mick, does a man as fine as that have to be such an insensitive little shit?

Judd returned the look of contemptuous appraisal, staring at the pouting pretty boy across the road. It made him want to puke, seeing the little act Mick was performing for his benefit. It might just have been plausible in a sixteen-year old virgin. In a twenty-five-year-old, it lacked credibility.

Mick dropped the flower, and untucked his T-shirt from his jeans. A tight stomach, then a slim, smooth chest were revealed as he pulled it off. His hair was ruffled when his head re-appeared, and his face wore a broad grin. Judd looked at the torso. Neat, not too muscular. An appendix scar peering over his faded jeans. A gold chain, small but catching the sun, dipped in the hollow of his throat. Without meaning to, he returned Mick's grin, and a kind of peace was made between them.

Mick was unbuckling his belt.

"Want to fuck?" he said, the grin not faltering.

"It's no use," came an answer, though not to that question.

"What isn't?"

"We're not compatible."

"Want a bet?"

Now he was unzipped, and turning away towards the wheat-field that bordered the road.

Judd watched as Mick cut a swat he through the swaying sea, his back the colour of the grain, so that he was almost camouflaged by it. It was a dangerous game, screwing in the open air – this wasn't San Francisco, or even Hampstead Heath. Nervously, Judd glanced along

the road. Still empty in both directions. And Mick was turning, deep in the field, turning and smiling and waving like a swimmer buoyed up in a golden surf. What the hell there was nobody to see, nobody to know. Just the hills, liquid in the heat-haze, their forested backs bent to the business of the earth, and a lost dog, sitting at the edge of the road, waiting for some lost master.

Judd followed Mick's path through the wheat, unbuttoning his shirt as he walked. Field-mice ran ahead of him, scurrying through the stalks as the giant came their way, his feet like thunder. Judd saw their panic, and smiled. He meant no harm to them, but then how were they to know that? Maybe he'd put out a hundred lives, mice, beetles, worms, before he reached the spot where Mick was lying, stark bollock naked, on a bed of trampled grain, still grinning.

It was good love they made, good, strong love, equal in pleasure for both; there was a precision to their passion, sensing the moment when effortless delight became urgent, when desire became necessity. They locked together, limb around limb, tongue around tongue, in a knot only orgasm could untie, their backs alternately scorched and scratched as they rolled around exchanging blows and kisses. In the thick of it, creaming together, they heard the phut-phut-phut of a tractor passing by; but they were past caring.

They made their way back to the Volkswagen with body-threshed wheat in their hair and their ears, in their socks and between their toes. Their grins had been replaced with easy smiles: the truce, if not permanent, would last a few hours at least.

The car was baking hot, and they had to open all the windows and doors to let the breeze cool it before they started towards Novi Pazar. It was four o'clock, and there was still an hour's driving ahead.

As they got into the car Mick said, "We'll forget the monastery, eh?"

Judd gaped. "I thought -”

"I couldn't bear another fucking Virgin."

They laughed lightly together, then kissed, tasting each other and themselves, a mingling of saliva, and the aftertaste of salt semen.

The following day was bright, but not particularly warm. No blue skies: just an even layer of white cloud. The morning air was sharp in the lining of the nostrils, like ether, or peppermint.

Vaslav Jelovsek watched the pigeons in the main square of Popolac courting death as they skipped and fluttered ahead of the vehicles that were buzzing around. Some about military business, some civilian. An air of sober intention barely suppressed the excitement he felt on this day, an excitement he knew was shared by every man, woman and child in Popolac. Shared by the pigeons too for all he knew. Maybe that was why they played under the wheels with such dexterity, knowing that on this day of days no harm could come to them.

He scanned the sky again, that same white sky he'd been peering at since dawn. The cloud-layer was low; not ideal for the celebrations. A phrase passed through his mind, an English phrase he'd heard from a friend, “to have your head in the clouds'. It meant, he gathered, to be lost in a reverie, in a white, sightless dream. That, he thought wryly, was all the West knew about clouds, that they stood for dreams. It took a vision they lacked to make a truth out of that casual turn of phrase. Here, in these secret hills, wouldn't they create a spectacular reality from those idle words? A living proverb.

A head in the clouds.

Already the first contingent was assembling in the square. There were one or two absentees owing to illness, but the auxiliaries were ready and waiting to take their places. Such eagerness! Such wide smiles when an auxiliary heard his or her name and number called and was taken out of line to join the limb that was already taking shape. On every side, miracles of organization. Everyone with a job to do and a place to go. There was no shouting or pushing: indeed, voices were scarcely raised above an eager whisper. He watched in admiration as the work of positioning and buckling and roping went on.

It was going to be a long and arduous day. Vaslav had been in the square since an hour before dawn, drinking coffee from imported plastic cups, discussing the half-hourly meteorological reports coming in from Pristina and Mitrovica, and watching the starless sky as the grey light of morning crept across it. Now he was drinking his sixth coffee of the day, and it was still barely seven o'clock. Across the square Metzinger looked as tired and as anxious as Vaslav felt. They'd watched the dawn seep out of the east together, Metzinger and he. But now they had separated, forgetting previous companionship, and would not speak until the contest was over. After all Metzinger was from Podujevo. He had his own city to support in the coming battle. Tomorrow they'd exchange tales of their adventures, but for today they must behave as if they didn't know each other, not even to

exchange a smile. For today they had to be utterly partisan, caring only for the victory of their own city over the opposition.

Now the first leg of Popolac was erected, to the mutual satisfaction of Metzinger and Vaslav. All the safety checks had been meticulously made, and the leg left the square, its shadow falling hugely across the face of the Town Hall. Vaslav sipped his sweet, sweet coffee and allowed himself a little grunt of satisfaction. Such days, such days. Days filled with glory, with snapping flags and high, stomach-turning sights, enough to last a man a lifetime. It was a golden foretaste of Heaven.

Let America have its simple pleasures, its cartoon mice, its candy-coated castles, its cults and its technologies, he wanted none of it. The greatest wonder of the world was here, hidden in the hills.

Ah, such days.

In the main square of Podujevo the scene was no less animated, and no less inspiring. Perhaps there was a muted sense of sadness underlying this year's celebration, but that was understandable. Nita Obrenovic, Podujevo's loved and respected organizer, was no longer living. The previous winter had claimed her at the age of ninety-four, leaving the city bereft of her fierce opinions and her fiercer proportions. For sixty years Nita had worked with the citizens of Podujevo, always planning for the next contest and improving on the designs, her energies spent on making the next creation more ambitious and more life-like than the last.

Now she was dead, and sorely missed. There was no disorganization in the streets without her, the people were far too disciplined for that, but they were already falling behind schedule, and it was almost seven-twenty-five. Nita's daughter had taken over in her mother's stead, but she lacked Nita's power to galvanize the people into action. She was, in a word, too gentle for the job in hand. It required a leader who was part prophet and part ringmaster, to coax and bully and inspire the citizens into their places. Maybe, after two or three decades, and with a few more contests under her belt, Nita Obrenovic's daughter would make the grade. But for today Podujevo was behindhand; safety checks were being overlooked; nervous looks replaced the confidence of earlier years.

Nevertheless, at six minutes before eight the first limb of Podujevo made its way out of the city to the assembly point, to wait for its fellow.

By that time the flanks were already lashed together in Popolac, and armed contingents were awaiting orders in the Town Square.

Mick woke promptly at seven, though there was no alarm clock in their simply furnished room at the Hotel Beograd. He lay in his bed and listened to Judd's regular breathing from the twin bed across the room. A dull morning light whimpered through the thin curtains, not encouraging an early departure. After a few minutes' staring at the cracked paintwork on the ceiling, and a while longer at the crudely carved crucifix on the opposite wall, Mick got up and went to the window. It was a dull day, as he had guessed. The sky was overcast, and the roofs of Novi Pazar were grey and featureless in the flat morning light. But beyond the roofs, to the east, he could see the hills. There was sun there. He could see shafts of light catching the blue-green of the forest, inviting a visit to their slopes. Today maybe they would go south to Kosovska Mitrovica. There was a market there, wasn't there, and a museum? And they could drive down the valley of the Ibar, following the road beside the river, where the hills rose wild and shining on either side. The hills, yes; today he decided they would see the hills.

It was eight-fifteen.

By nine the main bodies of Popolac and Podujevo were substantially assembled. In their allotted districts the limbs of both cities were ready and waiting to join their expectant torsos.

Vaslav Jelovsek capped his gloved hands over his eyes and surveyed the sky. The cloud-base had risen in the last hour, no doubt of it, and there were breaks in the clouds to the west; even, on occasion, a few glimpses of the sun. It wouldn't be a perfect day for the contest perhaps, but certainly adequate.

Mick and Judd breakfasted late on hemendeks – roughly translated as ham and eggs – and several cups of good black coffee. It was brightening up, even in Novi Pazar, and their ambitions were set high. Kosovska Mitrovica by lunchtime, and maybe a visit to the hill-castle of Zvecan in the afternoon.

About nine-thirty they motored out of Novi Pazar and took the Srbovac road south to the Ibar valley. Not a good road, but the bumps and pot-holes couldn't spoil the new day.

The road was empty, except for the occasional pedestrian; and in place of the maize and corn fields they'd passed on the previous day

the road was flanked by undulating hills, whose sides were thickly and darkly forested. Apart from a few birds, they saw no wildlife. Even their infrequent travelling companions petered out altogether after a few miles, and the occasional farmhouse they drove by appeared locked and shuttered up. Black pigs ran unattended in the yard, with no child to feed them. Washing snapped and billowed on a sagging line, with no washerwoman in sight.

At first this solitary journey through the hills was refreshing in its lack of human contact, but as the morning drew on, an uneasiness grew on them.

"Shouldn't we have seen a signpost to Mitrovica, Mick?"

He peered at the map.

"Maybe…"

"- we've taken the wrong road."

"If there'd been a sign, I'd have seen it. I think we should try and get off this road, bear south a bit more – meet the valley closer to Mitrovica than we'd planned."

"How do we get off this bloody road?"

"There've been a couple of turnings…"

"Dirt-tracks."

"Well it's either that or going on the way we are." Judd pursed his lips.

"Cigarette?" he asked.

"Finished them miles back."

In front of them, the hills formed an impenetrable line. There was no sign of life ahead; no frail wisp of chimney smoke, no sound of voice or vehicle.

"All right," said Judd, “we take the next turning. Anything's better than this."

They drove on. The road was deteriorating rapidly, the pot-holes becoming craters, the hummocks feeling like bodies beneath the wheels.

Then: "There!"

A turning: a palpable turning. Not a major road, certainly. In fact barely the dirt-track Judd had described the other roads as being, but it was an escape from the endless perspective of the road they were trapped on. "This is becoming a bloody safari," said Judd as the VW began to bump and grind its way along the doleful little track.

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I forgot to pack it."

They were beginning to climb now, as the track wound its way up into the hills. The forest closed over them, blotting out the sky, so a shifting patchwork of light and shadow scooted over the bonnet as they drove. There was birdsong suddenly, vacuous and optimistic, and a smell of new pine and undug earth. A fox crossed the track, up ahead, and watched a long moment as the car grumbled up towards it. Then, with the leisurely stride of a fearless prince, it sauntered away into the trees.

Wherever they were going, Mick thought, this was better than the road they'd left. Soon maybe they'd stop, and walk a while, to find a promontory from which they could see the valley, even Novi Pazar, nestled behind them.

The two men were still an hour's drive from Popolac when the head of the contingent at last marched out of the Town Square and took up its position with the main body.

This last exit left the city completely deserted. Not even the sick or the old were neglected on this day; no-one was to be denied the spectacle and the triumph of the contest. Every single citizen, however young or infirm, the blind, the crippled, babes in arms, pregnant women – all made their way up from their proud city to the stamping ground. It was the law that they should attend: but it needed no enforcing. No citizen of either city would have missed the chance to see that sight – to experience the thrill of that contest.

The confrontation had to be total, city against city. This was the way it had always been.

So the cities went up into the hills. By noon they were gathered, the citizens of Popolac and Podujevo, in the secret well of the hills, hidden from civilized eyes, to do ancient and ceremonial battle.

Tens of thousands of hearts beat faster. Tens of thousands of bodies stretched and strained and sweated as the twin cities took their positions. The shadows of the bodies darkened tracts of land the size of small towns; the weight of their feet trampled the grass to a green milk; their movement killed animals, crushed bushes and threw down trees. The earth literally reverberated with their passage, the hills echoing with the booming din of their steps. In the towering body of Podujevo, a few technical hitches were becoming apparent. A slight flaw in the knitting of the left flank had resulted in a weakness there: and there were consequent problems in the swiveling mechanism of the hips. It was stiffer than it should be, and the movements were not smooth. As a result there was considerable strain being put upon that region of the city. It was being dealt with bravely; after all, the contest was intended to press the contestants to their limits. But breaking point was closer than anyone would have dared to admit. The citizens were not as resilient as they had been in previous contests. A bad decade for crops had produced bodies less well-nourished, spines less supple, wills less resolute. The badly knitted flank might not have caused an accident in itself, but further weakened by the frailty of the competitors it set a scene for death on an unprecedented scale.

They stopped the car.

"Hear that?"

Mick shook his head. His hearing hadn't been good since he was an adolescent. Too many rock shows had blown his eardrums to hell.

Judd got out of the car.

The birds were quieter now. The noise he'd heard as they drove came again. It wasn't simply a noise: it was almost a motion in the earth, a roar that seemed seated in the substance of the hills.

Thunder, was it?

No, too rhythmical. It came again, through the soles of the feet - Boom. Mick heard it this time. He leaned out of the car window.

"It's up ahead somewhere. I hear it now." Judd nodded.

Boom.

The earth-thunder sounded again. "What the hell is it?" said Mick. "Whatever it is, I want to see it," Judd got back into the Volkswagen, smiling. "Sounds almost like guns," he said, starting the car. "Big guns."

Through his Russian-made binoculars Vaslav Jelovsek watched the starting-official raise his pistol. He saw the feather of white smoke rise from the barrel, and a second later heard the sound of the shot across the valley. The contest had begun.

He looked up at twin towers of Popolac and Podujevo. Heads in the clouds – well almost. They practically stretched to touch the sky. It was an awesome sight, a breath-stopping, sleep-stabbing sight. Two cities swaying and writhing and preparing to take their first steps towards each other in this ritual battle.

Of the two, Podujevo seemed the less stable. There was a slight hesitation as the city raised its left leg to begin its march. Nothing serious, just a little difficulty in coordinating hip and thigh muscles. A couple of steps and the city would find its rhythm; a couple more and its inhabitants would be moving as one creature, one perfect giant set to match its grace and power against its mirror-image.

The gunshot had sent flurries of birds up from the trees that banked the hidden valley. They rose up in celebration of the great contest, chattering their excitement as they swooped over the stamping-ground.

"Did you hear a shot?" asked Judd.

Mick nodded.

"Military exercises…?" Judd's smile had broadened. He could see the headlines already – exclusive reports of secret maneuvers in the depths of the Yugoslavian countryside. Russian tanks perhaps, tactical exercises being held out of the West's prying sight. With luck, he would be the carrier of this news.

Boom.

Boom.

There were birds in the air. The thunder was louder now.

It did sound like guns.

"It's over the next ridge…" said Judd.

"I don't think we should go any further."

"I have to see."

"I don't. We're not supposed to be here."

"I don't see any signs."

"They'll cart us away; deport us – I don't know – I just think -"

Boom.

"I've got to see."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the screaming started.

Podujevo was screaming: a death-cry. Someone buried in the weak flank had died of the strain, and had begun a chain of decay in the system. One man loosed his neighbour and that neighbour loosed his, spreading a cancer of chaos through the body of the city. The coherence of the towering structure deteriorated with terrifying rapidity as the failure of one part of the anatomy put unendurable pressure on the other. "Did you hear that?"

The masterpiece that the good citizens of Podujevo had constructed of their own flesh and blood tottered and then -a dynamited skyscraper, it began to fall.

The broken flank spewed citizens like a slashed artery spitting blood. Then, with a graceful sloth that made the agonies of the citizens all the more horrible, it bowed towards the earth, all its limbs dissembling as it fell. The huge head, that had brushed the clouds so recently, was flung back on its thick neck. Ten thousand mouths spoke a single scream for its vast mouth, a wordless, infinitely pitiable appeal to the sky. A howl of loss, a howl of anticipation, a howl of puzzlement. How, that scream demanded, could the day of days end like this, in a welter of falling bodies?

It was unmistakably human, though almost deafeningly loud. Judd's stomach convulsed. He looked across at Mick, who was as white as a sheet.

Judd stopped the car.

"No," said Mick.

"Listen – for Christ's sake," The din of dying moans, appeals and imprecations flooded the air. It was very close. "We've got to go on now," Mick implored.

Judd shook his head. He was prepared for some military spectacle – all the Russian army massed over the next hill but that noise in his ears was the noise of human flesh – too human for words. It reminded him of his childhood imaginings of Hell; the endless, unspeakable torments his mother had threatened him with if he failed to embrace Christ. It was a terror he'd forgotten for twenty years. But suddenly, here it was again, fresh-faced. Maybe the pit itself gaped just over the next horizon, with his mother standing at its lip, inviting him to taste its punishments. "If you won't drive, I will."

Mick got out of the car and crossed in front of it, glancing up the track as he did so. There was a moment's hesitation, no more than a moment's, when his eyes flickered with disbelief, before he turned towards the windscreen, his face even paler than it had been previously and said: "Jesus Christ…" in a voice that was thick with suppressed nausea.

His lover was still sitting behind the wheel, his head in his hands, trying to blot out memories. "Judd…"

Judd looked up, slowly. Mick was staring at him like a wildman, his face shining with a sudden, icy sweat. Judd looked past him. A few meters ahead the track had mysteriously darkened, as a tide edged towards the car, a thick, deep tide of blood. Judd's reason twisted and turned to make any other sense of the sight than that inevitable conclusion. But there was no saner explanation. It was blood, in unendurable abundance, blood without end -And now, in the breeze, there was the flavour of freshly – opened carcasses: the smell out of the depths of the human body, part sweet, part savoury.

Mick stumbled back to the passenger's side of the VW and fumbled weakly at the handle. The door opened suddenly and he lurched inside, his eyes glazed.

"Back up," he said.

Judd reached for the ignition. The tide of blood was already sloshing against the front wheels. Ahead, the world had been painted red.

"Drive, for fuck's sake, drive!"

Judd was making no attempt to start the car.

"We must look," he said, without conviction, “we have to."

"We don't have to do anything," said Mick, “but get the hell out of here. It's not our business…" "Plane-crash -"

"There's no smoke."

"Those are human voices."

Mick's instinct was to leave well alone. He could read about the tragedy in a newspaper – he could see the pictures tomorrow when they were grey and grainy. Today it was too fresh, too unpredictable - Anything could be at the end of that track, bleeding -”We must -”

Judd started the car, while beside him Mick began to moan quietly. The VW began to edge forward, nosing through the river of blood, its wheels spinning in the queasy, foaming tide.

"No," said Mick, very quietly, “please, no…"

"We must," was Judd's reply. "We must. We must."

Only a few yards away the surviving city of Popolac was recovering from its first convulsions. It stared, with a thousand eyes, at the ruins of its ritual enemy, now spread in a tangle of rope and bodies over the impacted ground, shattered forever. Popolac staggered back from the sight, its vast legs flattening the forest that bounded the stamping-ground, its arms flailing the air. But it kept its balance, even as a common insanity, woken by the horror at its feet, surged through its sinews and curdled its brain. The order went out: the body thrashed and twisted and turned from the grisly carpet of Podujevo, and fled into the hills.

As it headed into oblivion, its towering form passed between the car and the sun, throwing its cold shadow over the bloody road. Mick saw nothing through his tears, and Judd, his eyes narrowed against the sight he feared seeing around the next bend, only dimly registered that something had blotted the light for a minute. A cloud, perhaps. A flock of birds.

Had he looked up at that moment, just stolen a glance out towards the north-east, he would have seen Popolac's head, the vast, swarming head of a maddened city, disappearing below his line of vision, as it marched into the hills. He would have known that this territory was beyond his comprehension; and that there was no healing to be done in this corner of Hell. But he didn't see the city, and he and Mick's last turning-point had passed. From now on, like Popolac and its dead twin, they were lost to sanity, and to all hope of life.

They rounded the bend, and the ruins of Podujevo came into sight.

Their domesticated imaginations had never conceived of a sight so unspeakably brutal.

Perhaps in the battlefields of Europe as many corpses had been heaped together: but had so many of them been women and children, locked together with the corpses of men? There had been piles of dead as high, but ever so many so recently abundant with life? There had been cities laid waste as quickly, but ever an entire city lost to the simple dictate of gravity?

It was a sight beyond sickness. In the face of it the mind slowed to a snail's pace, the forces of reason picked over the evidence with meticulous hands, searching for a flaw in it, a place where it could say: This is not happening. This is a dream of death, not death itself.

But reason could find no weakness in the wall. This was true. It was death indeed.

Podujevo had fallen.

Thirty-eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty-five citizens were spread on the ground, or rather flung in ungainly, seeping piles. Those who had not died of the fall, or of suffocation, were dying. There would be no survivors from that city except that bundle of onlookers that had traipsed out of their homes to watch the contest. Those few Podujevians, the crippled, the sick, the ancient few, were now staring, like Mick and Judd, at the carnage, trying not to believe.

Judd was first out of the car. The ground beneath his suedes was sticky with coagulating gore. He surveyed the carnage. There was no wreckage: no sign of a plane crash, no fire, no smell of fuel. Just tens of thousands of fresh bodies, all either naked or dressed in an identical grey serge, men, women and children alike. Some of them, he could see, wore leather harnesses, tightly buckled around their upper chests, and snaking out from these contraptions were lengths of rope, miles and miles of it. The closer he looked, the more he saw of the extraordinary system of knots and lashings that still held the bodies together. For some reason these people had been tied together, side by side. Some were yoked on their neighbours' shoulders, straddling them like boys playing at horseback riding. Others were locked arm in arm, knitted together with threads of rope in a wall of muscle and bone. Yet others were trussed in a ball, with their heads tucked between their knees. All were in some way connected up with their fellows,

tied together as though in some insane collective bondage game.

Another shot.

Mick looked up.

Across the field a solitary man, dressed in a drab overcoat, was walking amongst the bodies with a revolver, dispatching the dying. It was a pitifully inadequate act of mercy, but he went on nevertheless, choosing the suffering children first. Emptying the revolver, filling it again, emptying it, filling it, emptying it -Mick let go. He yelled at the top of his voice over the moans of the injured.

"What is this?"

The man looked up from his appalling duty, his face as dead-grey as his coat.

"Uh?" he grunted, frowning at the two interlopers through his thick spectacles.

"What's happened here?" Mick shouted across at him. It felt good to shout, it felt good to sound angry at the man. Maybe he was to blame. It would be a fine thing, just to have someone to blame.

"Tell us -" Mick said. He could hear the tears throbbing in his voice. "Tell us, for God's sake. Explain." Grey-coat shook his head. He didn't understand a word this young idiot was saying. It was English he spoke, but that's all he knew. Mick began to walk towards him, feeling all the time the eyes of the dead on him. Eyes like black, shining gems set in broken faces: eyes looking at him upside down, on heads severed from their seating. Eyes in heads that had solid howls for voices. Eyes in heads beyond howls, beyond breath. Thousands of eyes. He reached Grey-coat, whose gun was almost empty. He had taken off his spectacles and thrown them aside. He too was weeping, little jerks ran through his big, ungainly body.

At Mick's feet, somebody was reaching for him. He didn't want to look, but the hand touched his shoe and he had no choice but to see its owner. A young man, lying like a flesh swastika, every joint smashed. A child lay under him, her bloody legs poking out like two pink sticks.

He wanted the man's revolver, to stop the hand from touching him. Better still he wanted a machine-gun, a flamethrower, anything to wipe the agony away.

As he looked up from the broken body, Mick saw Grey-coat raise the revolver.

"Judd -" he said, but as the word left his lips the muzzle of the revolver was slipped into Grey-coat's mouth and the trigger was pulled.

Grey-coat had saved the last bullet for himself. The back of his head opened like a dropped egg, the shell of his skull flying off. His body went limp and sank to the ground, the revolver still between his lips.

"We must -" began Mick, saying the words to nobody. "We must…"

What was the imperative? In this situation, what must they do?

"We must -"Judd was behind him. "Help -" he said to Mick.

"Yes. We must get help. We must -" "Go."

Go! That was what they must do. On any pretext, for any fragile, cowardly reason, they must go. Get out of the battlefield, get out of the reach of a dying hand with a wound in place of a body.

"We have to tell the authorities. Find a town. Get help -"

"Priests," said Mick. "They need priests."

It was absurd, to think of giving the Last Rites to so many people. It would take an army of priests, a water cannon filled with holy water, a loudspeaker to pronounce the benedictions.

They turned away, together, from the horror, and wrapped their arms around each other, then picked their way through the carnage to the car.

It was occupied.

Vaslav Jelovsek was sitting behind the wheel, and trying to start the Volkswagen. He turned the ignition key once. Twice. Third time the engine caught and the wheels span in the crimson mud as he put her into reverse and backed down the track. Vaslav saw the Englishmen running towards the car, cursing him. There was no help for it – he didn't want to steal the vehicle, but he had work to do. He had been a referee, he had been responsible for the contest, and the safety of the contestants. One of the heroic cities had already fallen. He must do everything in his power to prevent Popolac from following its twin.

He must chase Popolac, and reason with it. Talk it down out of its terrors with quiet words and promises. If he failed there would be another disaster the equal of the one in front of him, and his conscience was already broken enough.

Mick was still chasing the VW, shouting at Jelovsek. The thief took no notice, concentrating on maneuvering the car back down the narrow, slippery track. Mick was losing the chase rapidly. The car had begun to pick up speed. Furious, but without the breath to speak his fury, Mick stood in the road, hands on his knees, heaving and sobbing. "Bastard!" said Judd.

Mick looked down the track. Their car had already disappeared.

"Fucker couldn't even drive properly."

"We have… we have… to catch… up…" said Mick through gulps of breath.

"How?"

"On foot…"

"We haven't even got a map… it's in the car."

"Jesus… Christ… Almighty."

They walked down the track together, away from the field.

After a few meters the tide of blood began to peter out. Just a few congealing rivulets dribbled on towards the main road. Mick and Judd followed the bloody tire marks to the junction.

The Srbovac road was empty in both directions. The tire marks showed a left turn. "He's gone deeper into the hills," said Judd, staring along the lonely road towards the blue-green distance.

"He's out of his mind!"

"Do we go back the way we came?"

"It'll take us all night on foot."

"We'll hop a lift."

Judd shook his head: his face was slack and his look lost.

"Don't you see, Mick, they all knew this was happening. The people in the farms – they got the hell out while those people went crazy up there. There'll be no cars along this road, I'll lay you anything – except maybe a couple of shit dumb tourists like us – and no tourist would stop for the likes of us."

He was right. They looked like butchers – splattered with blood. Their faces were shining with grease, their eyes maddened.

"We'll have to walk," said Judd, “the way he went."

He pointed along the road. The hills were darker now; the sun had suddenly gone out on their slopes. Mick shrugged. Either way he could see they had a night on the road ahead of them. But he wanted to walk somewhere – anywhere – as long as he put distance between him and the dead.

In Popolac a kind of peace reigned. Instead of a frenzy of panic there was a numbness, a sheep-like acceptance of the world as it was. Locked in their positions, strapped, roped and harnessed to each other in a living system that allowed for no single voice to be louder than any other, nor any back to labour less than its neighbour's, they let an insane consensus replace the tranquil voice of reason. They were convulsed into one mind, one thought, one ambition. They became, in the space of a few moments, the single-minded giant whose image they had so brilliantly re-created. The illusion of petty individuality was swept away in an irresistible tide of collective feeling – not a mob's passion, but a telepathic surge that dissolved the voices of thousands into one irresistible command. And the voice said: Go!

The voice said: take this horrible sight away, where I need never see it again.

Popolac turned away into the hills, its legs taking strides half a mile long. Each man, woman and child in that seething tower was sightless. They saw only through the eyes of the city. They were thoughtless, but to think the city's thoughts. And they believed themselves deathless, in their lumbering, relentless strength. Vast and mad and deathless.

Two miles along the road Mick and Judd smelt petrol in the air, and a little further along they came upon the VW. It had overturned in the reed-clogged drainage ditch at the side of the road. It had not caught fire. The driver's door was open, and the body of Vaslav Jelovsek had tumbled out. His face was calm in unconsciousness. There seemed to

be no sign of injury, except for a small cut or two on his sober face. They gently pulled the thief out of the wreckage and up out of the filth of the ditch on to the road. He moaned a little as they fussed about him, rolling Mick's sweater up to pillow his head and removing the man's jacket and tie. Quite suddenly, he opened his eyes.

He stared at them both.

"Are you all right?" Mick asked.

The man said nothing for a moment. He seemed not to understand.

Then: "English?" he said. His accent was thick, but the question was quite clear.

"Yes."

"I heard your voices. English."

He frowned and winced.

"Are you in pain?" said Judd.

The man seemed to find this amusing.

"Am I in pain?" he repeated, his face screwed up in a mixture of agony and delight.

"I shall die," he said, through gritted teeth.

"No," said Mick, “you're all right -”

The man shook his head, his authority absolute.

"I shall die," he said again, the voice full of determination, "I want to die."

Judd crouched closer to him. His voice was weaker by the moment.

"Tell us what to do," he said. The man had closed his eyes. Judd shook him awake, roughly. "Tell us," he said again, his show of compassion rapidly disappearing. "Tell us what this is all about." "About?" said the man, his eyes still closed. "It was a fall, that's all. Just a fall…"

"What fell?"

"The city. Podujevo. My city."

"What did it fall from?"

"Itself, of course."

The man was explaining nothing; just answering one riddle with another.

"Where were you going?" Mick inquired, trying to sound as unagressive as possible.

"After Popolac," said the man.

"Popolac?" said Judd.

Mick began to see some sense in the story.

"Popolac is another city. Like Podujevo. Twin cities. They're on the map -"

"Where's the city now?" said Judd.

Vaslav Jelovsek seemed to choose to tell the truth. There was a moment when he hovered between dying with a riddle on his lips, and living long enough to unburden his story. What did it matter if the tale was told now? There could never be another contest: all that was over.

"They came to fight," he said, his voice now very soft, "Popolac and Podujevo. They come every ten years -" "Fight?" said Judd. "You mean all those people were slaughtered?"

Vaslav shook his head.

"No, no. They fell. I told you."

"Well, how do they fight?" Mick said.

"Go into the hills," was the only reply.

Vaslav opened his eyes a little. The faces that loomed over him were exhausted and sick. They had suffered, these innocents. They deserved some explanation.

"As giants," he said. "They fought as giants. They made a body out of their bodies, do you understand? The frame, the muscles, the bone,

the eyes, nose, teeth all made of men and women."

"He's delirious," said Judd.

"You go into the hills," the man repeated. "See for yourselves how true it is."

"Even supposing -" Mick began.

Vaslav interrupted him, eager to be finished. "They were good at the game of giants. It took many centuries of practice: every ten years making the figure larger and larger. One always ambitious to be larger than the other. Ropes to tie them all together, flawlessly. Sinews… ligaments… There was food in its belly… there were pipes from the loins, to take away the waste. The best-sighted sat in the eye-sockets, the best voiced in the mouth and throat. You wouldn't believe the engineering of it."

"I don't," said Judd, and stood up.

"It is the body of the state," said Vaslav, so softly his voice was barely above a whisper, "it is the shape of our lives." There was a silence. Small clouds passed over the road, soundlessly shedding their mass to the air. "It was a miracle," he said. It was as if he realized the true enormity of the fact for the first time. "It was a miracle." It was enough. Yes. It was quite enough.

His mouth closed, the words said, and he died.

Mick felt this death more acutely than the thousands they had fled from; or rather this death was the key to unlock the anguish he felt for them all.

Whether the man had chosen to tell a fantastic lie as he died, or whether this story was in some way true, Mick felt useless in the face of it. His imagination was too narrow to encompass the idea. His brain ached with the thought of it, and his compassion cracked under the weight of misery he felt.

They stood on the road, while the clouds scudded by, their vague, grey shadows passing over them towards the enigmatic hills.

It was twilight.

Popolac could stride no further. It felt exhaustion in every muscle. Here and there in its huge anatomy deaths had occurred; but there

was no grieving in the city for its deceased cells. If the dead were in the interior, the corpses were allowed to hang from their harnesses. If they formed the skin of the city they were unbuckled from their positions and released, to plunge into the forest below.

The giant was not capable of pity. It had no ambition but to continue until it ceased.

As the sun slunk out of sight Popolac rested, sitting on a small hillock, nursing its huge head in its huge hands. The stars were coming out, with their familiar caution. Night was approaching, mercifully bandaging up the wounds of the day, blinding eyes that had seen too much.

Popolac rose to its feet again, and began to move, step by booming step. It would not be long surely, before fatigue overcame it: before it could lie down in the tomb of some lost valley and die.

But for a space yet it must walk on, each step more agonizingly slow than the last, while the night bloomed black around its head.

Mick wanted to bury the car-thief, somewhere on the edge of the forest. Judd, however, pointed out that burying a body might seem, in tomorrow's saner light, a little suspicious. And besides, wasn't it absurd to concern themselves with one corpse when there were literally thousands of them lying a few miles from where they stood? The body was left to lie, therefore, and the car to sink deeper into the ditch.

They began to walk again.

It was cold, and colder by the moment, and they were hungry. But the few houses they passed were all deserted, locked and shuttered, every one.

"What did he mean?" said Mick, as they stood looking at another locked door.

"He was talking metaphor -" "All that stuff about giants?"

"It was some Trotskyist tripe -" Judd insisted.

"I don't think so."

"I know so. It was his deathbed speech, he'd probably been preparing for years."

"I don't think so," Mick said again, and began walking back towards the road.

"Oh, how's that?" Judd was at his back.

"He wasn't toeing some party line."

"Are you saying you think there's some giant around here someplace? For God's sake!"

Mick turned to Judd. His face was difficult to see the twilight. But his voice was sober with belief. "Yes. I think he was telling the truth."

"That's absurd. That's ridiculous. No."

Judd hated Mick that moment. Hated his naivetй, his passion to believe any half-witted story if it had a whiff of romance about it. And this? This was the worst, the most preposterous.

"No," he said again. "No. No. No."

The sky was porcelain smooth, and the outline of the hills black as pitch.

"I'm fucking freezing," said Mick out of the ink. "Are you staying here or walking with me?"

Judd shouted: "We're not going to find anything this way."

"Well it's a long way back."

"We're just going deeper into the hills."

"Do what you like – I'm walking."

His footsteps receded: the dark encased him. After a minute, Judd followed. The night was cloudless and bitter. They walked on, their collars up against the chill, their feet swollen in their shoes. Above them the whole sky had become a parade of stars. A triumph of spilled light, from which the eye could make as many patterns as it had patience for. After a while, they slung their tired arms around each other, for comfort and warmth.

About eleven o'clock, they saw the glow of a window in the distance.

The woman at the door of the stone cottage didn't smile, but she

understood their condition, and let them in. There seemed to be no purpose in trying to explain to either the woman or her crippled husband what they had seen. The cottage had no telephone, and there was no sign of a vehicle, so even had they found some way to express themselves, nothing could be done.

With mimes and face-pullings they explained that they were hungry and exhausted. They tried further to explain they were lost, cursing themselves for leaving their phrase-book in the VW. She didn't seem to understand very much of what they said, but sat them down beside a blazing fire and put a pan of food on the stove to heat. They ate thick unsalted pea soup and eggs, and occasionally smiled their thanks at the woman. Her husband sat beside the fire, making no attempt to talk, or even look at the visitors.

The food was good. It buoyed their spirits.

They would sleep until morning and then begin the long trek back. By dawn the bodies in the field would be being quantified, identified, parceled up and dispatched to their families. The air would be full of reassuring noises, cancelling out the moans that still rang in their ears. There would be helicopters, lorry loads of men organizing the clearing-up operations. All the rites and paraphernalia of a civilized disaster.

And in a while, it would be palatable. It would become part of their history: a tragedy, of course, but one they could explain, classify and learn to live with. All would be well, yes, all would be well. Come morning. The sleep of sheer fatigue came on them suddenly. They lay where they had fallen, still sitting at the table, their heads on their crossed arms. A litter of empty bowls and bread crusts surrounded them.

They knew nothing. Dreamt nothing. Felt nothing.

Then the thunder began.

In the earth, in the deep earth, a rhythmical tread, as of a titan, that came, by degrees, closer and closer. The woman woke her husband. She blew out the lamp and went to the door. The night sky was luminous with stars: the hills black on every side.

The thunder still sounded: a full half minute between every boom, but louder now. And louder with every new step. They stood at the door together, husband and wife, and listened to the night-hills echo back and forth with the sound. There was no lightning to accompany

the thunder.

Just the boom – Boom – Boom – It made the ground shake: it threw dust down from the door-lintel, and rattled the window-latches.

Boom – Boom – They didn't know what approached, but whatever shape it took, and whatever it intended, there seemed no sense in running from it. Where they stood, in the pitiful shelter of their cottage, was as safe as any nook of the forest. How could they choose, out of a hundred thousand trees, which would be standing when the thunder had passed? Better to wait: and watch.

The wife's eyes were not good, and she doubted what she saw when the blackness of the hill changed shape and reared up to block the stars. But her husband had seen it too: the unimaginably huge head, vaster in the deceiving darkness, looming up and up, dwarfing the hills themselves with its ambition.

He fell to his knees, babbling a prayer, his arthritic legs twisted beneath him.

His wife screamed: no words she knew could keep this monster at bay – no prayer, no plea, had power over it. In the cottage, Mick woke and his outstretched arm, twitching with a sudden cramp, wiped the plate and the lamp off the table.

They smashed.

Judd woke.

The screaming outside had stopped. The woman had disappeared from the doorway into the forest. Any tree, any tree at all, was better than this sight. Her husband still let a string of prayers dribble from his slack mouth, as the great leg of the giant rose to take another step -Boom -The cottage shook. Plates danced and smashed off the dresser. A clay pipe rolled from the mantelpiece and shattered in the ashes of the hearth.

The lovers knew the noise that sounded in their substance: that earth-thunder.

Mick reached for Judd, and took him by the shoulder.

"You see," he said, his teeth blue-grey in the darkness of the cottage. "See? See?"

There was a kind of hysteria bubbling behind his words. He ran to the door, stumbling over a chair in the dark. Cursing and bruised he staggered out into the night -Boom -The thunder was deafening. This time it broke all the windows in the cottage. In the bedroom one of the roof-joists cracked and flung debris downstairs. Judd joined his lover at the door. The old man was now face down on the ground, his sick and swollen fingers curled, his begging lips pressed to the damp soil.

Mick was looking up, towards the sky. Judd followed his gaze.

There was a place that showed no stars. It was a darkness in the shape of a man, a vast, broad human frame, a colossus that soared up to meet heaven. It was not quite a perfect giant. Its outline was not tidy; it seethed and swarmed.

He seemed broader too, this giant, than any real man. His legs were abnormally thick and stumpy, and his arms were not long. The hands, as they clenched and unclenched, seemed oddly-jointed and over-delicate for its torso. Then it raised one huge, flat foot and placed it on the earth, taking a stride towards them.

Boom -The step brought the roof collapsing in on the cottage.

Everything that the car-thief had said was true. Popolac was a city and a giant; and it had gone into the hills. Now their eyes were becoming accustomed to the night light.

They could see in ever more horrible detail the way this monster was constructed. It was a masterpiece of human engineering: a man made entirely of men. Or rather, a sexless giant, made of men and women and children. All the citizens of Popolac writhed and strained in the body of this flesh-knitted giant, their muscles stretched to breaking point, their bones close to snapping.

They could see how the architects of Popolac had subtly altered the proportions of the human body; how the thing had been made squatter to lower its centre of gravity; how its legs had been made elephantine to bear the weight of the torso; how the head was sunk low on to the wide shoulders, so that the problems of a weak neck had been minimized.

Despite these malformations, it was horribly life-like. The bodies that were bound together to make its surface were naked but for their harnesses, so that its surface glistened in the starlight, like one vast human torso. Even the muscles were well copied, though simplified.

They could see the way the roped bodies pushed and pulled against each other in solid cords of flesh and bone. They could see the intertwined people that made up the body: the backs like turtles packed together to offer the sweep of the pectorals; the lashed and knotted acrobats at the joints of the arms and the legs alike, rolling and unwinding to articulate the city.

But surely the most amazing sight of all was the face.

Cheeks of bodies; cavernous eye-sockets in which heads stared, five bound together for each eyeball; a broad, flat nose and a mouth that opened and closed, as the muscles of the jaw bunched and hollowed rhythmically. And from that mouth, lined with teeth of bald children, the voice of the giant, now only a weak copy of its former powers, spoke a single note of idiot music.

Popolac walked and Popolac sang.

Was there ever a sight in Europe the equal of it?

They watched, Mick and Judd, as it took another step towards them.

The old man had wet his pants. Blubbering and begging, he dragged himself away from the ruined cottage into the surrounding trees, dragging his dead legs after him.

The Englishmen remained where they stood, watching the spectacle as it approached. Neither dread nor horror touched them now, just an awe that rooted them to the spot. They knew this was a sight they could never hope to see again; this was the apex – after this there was only common experience. Better to stay then, though every step brought death nearer, better to stay and see the sight while it was still there to be seen. And if it killed them, this monster, then at least they would have glimpsed a miracle, known this terrible majesty for a brief moment. It seemed a fair exchange.

Popolac was within two steps of the cottage. They could see the complexities of its structure quite clearly. The faces of the citizens were becoming detailed: white, sweat-wet, and content in their weariness. Some hung dead from their harnesses, their legs swinging back and forth like the hanged. Others, children particularly, had ceased to obey their training, and had relaxed their positions, so that the form of the body was degenerating, beginning to seethe with the boils of rebellious cells.

Yet it still walked, each step an incalculable effort of coordination and strength.

Boom -The step that trod the cottage came sooner than they thought.

Mick saw the leg raised; saw the faces of the people in the shin and ankle and foot – they were as big as he was now – all huge men chosen to take the full weight of this great creation.

Many were dead. The bottom of the foot, he could see, was a jigsaw of crushed and bloody bodies, pressed to death under the weight of their fellow citizens.

The foot descended with a roar.

In a matter of seconds the cottage was reduced to splinters and dust.

Popolac blotted the sky utterly. It was, for a moment, the whole world, heaven and earth, its presence filled the senses to overflowing. At this proximity one look could not encompass it, the eye had to range backwards and forwards over its mass to take it all in, and even then the mind refused to accept the whole truth. A whirling fragment of stone, flung off from the cottage as it collapsed, struck Judd full in the face. In his head he heard the killing stroke like a ball hitting a wall: a play-yard death. No pain: no remorse. Out like a light, a tiny, insignificant light; his death-cry lost in the pandemonium, his body hidden in the smoke and darkness. Mick neither saw nor heard Judd die.

He was too busy staring at the foot as it settled for a moment in the ruins of the cottage, while the other leg mustered the will to move.

Mick took his chance. Howling like a banshee, he ran towards the leg, longing to embrace the monster. He stumbled in the wreckage, and stood again, bloodied, to reach for the foot before it was lifted and he was left behind. There was a clamour of agonized breath as the message came to the foot that it must move; Mick saw the muscles of the shin bunch and marry as the leg began to lift. He made one last lunge at the limb as it began to leave the ground, snatching a harness or a rope, or human hair, or flesh itself – anything to catch this passing miracle and be part of it. Better to go with it wherever it was going, serve it in its purpose, whatever that might be; better to die with it than live without it.

He caught the foot, and found a safe purchase on its ankle.

Screaming his sheer ecstasy at his success he felt the great leg raised, and glanced down through the swirling dust to the spot where he had stood, already receding as the limb climbed.

The earth was gone from beneath him. He was a hitchhiker with a god: the mere life he had left was nothing to him now, or ever. He would live with this thing, yes, he would live with it – seeing it and seeing it and eating it with his eyes until he died of sheer gluttony.

He screamed and howled and swung on the ropes, drinking up his triumph. Below, far below, he glimpsed Judd 's body, curled up pale on the dark ground, irretrievable. Love and life and sanity were gone, gone like the memory of his name, or his sex, or his ambition.

It all meant nothing. Nothing at all.

Boom -Boom -Popolac walked, the noise of its steps receding to the east. Popolac walked, the hum of its voice lost in the night.

After a day, birds came, foxes came, flies, butterflies, wasps came. Judd moved, Judd shifted, Judd gave birth. In his belly maggots warmed themselves, in a vixen's den the good flesh of his thigh was fought over. After that, it was quick. The bones yellowing, the bones crumbling: soon, an empty space which he had once filled with breath and opinions.

Darkness, light, darkness, light. He interrupted neither with his name.

VII: DREAD

There is no delight the equal of dread. If it were possible to sit, invisible, between two people on any train, in any waiting room or office, the conversation overheard would time and again circle on that subject. Certainly the debate might appear to be about something entirely different; the state of the nation, idle chat about death on the roads, the rising price of dental care; but strip away the metaphor, the innuendo, and there, nestling at the heart of the discourse, is dread. While the nature of God, and the possibility of eternal life go undiscussed, we happily chew over the minutiae of misery. The syndrome recognizes no boundaries; in bath-house and seminar-room alike, the same ritual is repeated. With the inevitability of a tongue returning to probe a painful tooth, we come back and back and back again to our fears, sitting to talk them over with the eagerness of a hungry man before a full and steaming plate.

While he was still at university, and afraid to speak, Stephen Grace was taught to speak of why he was afraid. In fact not simply to talk about it, but to analyze and dissect his every nerve ending, looking for tiny terrors. In this investigation, he had a teacher: Quaid.

It was an age of gurus; it was their season. In universities up and down England young men and women were looking east and west for people to follow like lambs; Steve Grace was just one of many. It was his bad luck that Quaid was the Messiah he found.

They'd met in the Student Common Room.

"The name's Quaid," said the man at Steve's elbow at the bar.

"Oh."

"You're -?"

"Steve Grace."

"Yes. You're in the Ethics class, right?"

"Right."

"I don't see you in any of the other Philosophy seminars or lectures."

"It's my extra subject for the year. I'm on the English Literature course. I just couldn't bear the idea of a year in the Old Norse classes."

"So you plumped for Ethics."

"Yes."

Quaid ordered a double brandy. He didn't look that well off, and a double brandy would have just about crippled Steve's finances for the next week. Quaid downed it quickly, and ordered another.

"What are you having?"

Steve was nursing half a pint of luke-warm lager, determined to make it last an hour.

"Nothing for me."

"Yes you will."

"I'm fine."

"Another brandy and a pint of lager for my friend."

Steve didn't resist Quaid's generosity. A pint and a half of lager in his unfed system would help no end in dulling the tedium of his oncoming seminars on "Charles Dickens as a Social Analyst'. He yawned just to think of it. "Somebody ought to write a thesis on drinking as a social activity."

Quaid studied his brandy a moment, then downed it.

"Or as oblivion," he said.

Steve looked at the man. Perhaps five years older than Steve's twenty. The mixture of clothes he wore was confusing. Tattered running shoes, cords, a grey-white shirt that had seen better days: and over it a very expensive black leather jacket that hung badly on his tall, thin frame. The face was long and unremarkable; the eyes milky blue, and so pale that the colour seemed to seep into the whites, leaving just the pin-pricks of his irises visible behind his heavy glasses. Lips full, like a Jagger, but pale, dry and un-sensual. Hair, a dirty blond.

Quaid, Steve decided, could have passed for a Dutch dope-pusher.

He wore no badges. They were the common currency of a student's obsessions, and Quaid looked naked without something to imply how he took his pleasures. Was he a gay, feminist, save-the-whale campaigner; or a fascist vegetarian? What was he into, for God's sake?

"You should have been doing Old Norse," said Quaid.

"Why?"

"They don't even bother to mark the papers on that course," said Quaid.

Steve hadn't heard about this. Quaid droned on.

"They just throw them all up into the air. Face up, an A. Face down, a B."

Oh, it was a joke. Quaid was being witty. Steve attempted a laugh, but Quaid's face remained unmoved by his own attempt at humour.

"You should be in Old Norse," he said again. "Who needs Bishop Berkeley anyhow. Or Plato. Or -" "Or?"

"It's all shit."

"Yes."

"I've watched you, in the Philosophy Class -"Steve began to wonder about Quaid.

"- You never take notes do you?" "No."

"I thought you were either sublimely confident, or you simply couldn't care less."

"Neither. I'm just completely lost."

Quaid grunted, and pulled out a pack of cheap cigarettes. Again, that was not the done thing. You either smoked Gauloises, Camel or nothing at all.

"It's not true philosophy they teach you here," said Quaid, with unmistakable contempt.

"Oh?"

"We get spoon-fed a bit of Plato, or a bit of Bentham -no real analysis. It's got all the right markings of course. It looks like the beast: it even smells a bit like the beast to the uninitiated."

"What beast?"

"Philosophy. True Philosophy. It's a beast, Stephen. Don't you think?"

"I hadn't -"

"It's wild. It bites."

He grinned, suddenly vulpine. "Yes. It bites," he replied. Oh, that pleased him. Again, for luck: "Bites." Stephen nodded. The metaphor was beyond him. "I think we should feel mauled by our subject." Quaid was warming to the whole subject of mutilation by education. "We should be frightened to juggle the ideas we should talk about."

Why?"

"Because if we were philosophers worth we wouldn't be exchanging academic pleasantries. We wouldn't be talking semantics; using linguistic trickery to cover the real concerns."

"What would we be doing?"

Steve was beginning to feel like Quaid's straight man, except that Quaid wasn't in a joking mood. His face was set: his pinprick irises had closed down to tiny dots.

"We should be walking close to the beast, Steve, don't you think? Reaching out to stroke it, pet it, milk it-" "What… er… what is the beast?"

Quaid was clearly a little exasperated by the pragmatism of the enquiry.

"It's the subject of any worthwhile philosophy, Stephen. It's the things we fear, because we don't understand them. It's the dark behind the door."

Steve thought of a door. Thought of the dark. He began to see what Quaid was driving at in his labyrinthine fashion. Philosophy was a way to talk about fear.

"We should discuss what's intimate to our psyches," said Quaid. "If we don't… we risk…"

Quaid's loquaciousness deserted him suddenly.

"What?"

Quaid was staring at his empty brandy glass, seeming to will it to be full again.

"Want another?" said Steve, praying that the answer would be no.

"What do we risk?" Quaid repeated the question. "Well, I think if we don't go out and find the beast -" Steve could see the punchline coming.

"- sooner or later the beast will come and find us."

There is no delight the equal of dread. As long as it's someone else's.

Casually, in the following week or two, Steve made some enquiries about the curious Mr. Quaid. Nobody knew his first name.

Nobody was certain of his age; but one of the secretaries thought he was over thirty, which came as a surprise. His parents, Cheryl had heard him say, were dead. Killed, the thought.

That appeared to be the sum of human knowledge where Quaid was concerned.

"I owe you a drink," said Steve, touching Quaid on the shoulder.

He looked as though he'd been bitten.

"Brandy?"

"Thank you." Steve ordered the drinks. "Did I startle you?" "I was thinking."

"No philosopher should be without one."

"One what?"

"Brain."

They fell to talking. Steve didn't know why he'd approached Quaid again. The man was ten years his senior and in a different intellectual league. He probably intimidated Steve, if he was to be honest about it. Quaid's relentless talk of beasts confused him. Yet he wanted more of the same: more metaphors: more of that humourless voice telling him how useless the tutors were, how weak the students.

In Quaid's world there were no certainties. He had no secular gurus and certainly no religion. He seemed incapable of viewing any system,

whether it was political or philosophical, without cynicism.

Though he seldom laughed out loud, Steve knew there was a bitter humour in his vision of the world. People were lambs and sheep, all looking for shepherds. Of course these shepherds were fictions, in Quaid's opinion. All that existed, in the darkness outside the sheep-fold were the fears that fixed on the innocent mutton: waiting, patient as stone, for their moment.

Everything was to be doubted, but the fact that dread existed.

Quaid's intellectual arrogance was exhilarating. Steve soon came to love the iconoclastic ease with which he demolished belief after belief. Sometimes it was painful when Quaid formulated a water-tight argument against one of Steve's dogma. But after a few weeks, even the sound of the demolition seemed to excite. Quaid was clearing the undergrowth, felling the trees, razing the stubble. Steve felt free.

Nation, family, Church, law. All ash. All useless. All cheats, and chains and suffocation.

There was only dread.

"I fear, you fear, we fear," Quaid was fond of saying. "He, she or it fears. There's no conscious thing on the face of the world that doesn't know dread more intimately than its own heartbeat."

One of Quaid's favourite baiting-victims was another Philosophy and Eng. Lit. student, Cheryl Fromm. She would rise to his more outrageous remarks like fish to rain, and while the two of them took knives to each other's arguments Steve would sit back and watch the spectacle. Cheryl was, in Quaid's phrase, a pathological optimist. "And you're full of shit," she'd say when the debate had warmed up a little. "So who cares if you're afraid of your own shadow? I'm not. I feel fine."

She certainly looked it. Cheryl Fromm was wet dream material, but too bright for anyone to try making a move on her.

"We all taste dread once in a while," Quaid would reply to her, and his milky eyes would study her face intently, watching for her reaction, trying, Steve knew, to find a flaw in her conviction.

"I don't."

"No fears? No nightmares?"

"No way. I've got a good family; don't have any skeletons in my closet. I don't even eat meat, so I don't feel bad when I drive past a slaughterhouse. I don't have any shit to put on show. Does that mean I'm not real?" "It means," Quaid's eyes were snake-slits, “it means your confidence has something big to cover." "Back to nightmares."

"Big nightmares."

"Be specific: define your terms."

"I can't tell you what you fear."

"Tell me what you fear then."

Quaid hesitated. "Finally," he said, “it's beyond analysis."

"Beyond analysis, my ass!"

That brought an involuntary smile to Steve's lips. Cheryl's ass was indeed beyond analysis. The only response was to kneel down and worship.

Quaid was back on his soap-box.

"What I fear is personal to me. It makes no sense in a larger context. The signs of my dread, the images my brain uses, if you like, to illustrate my fear, those signs are mild stuff by comparison with the real horror that's at the root of my personality."

"I've got images," said Steve. "Pictures from childhood that make me think of -” He stopped, regretting this confessional already.

"What?" said Cheryl. "You mean things to do with bad experiences? Falling off your bike, or something like that?" "Perhaps," Steve said. "I find myself, sometimes, thinking of those pictures. Not deliberately, just when my concentration's idling. It's almost as though my mind went to them automatically."

Quaid gave a little grunt of satisfaction. "Precisely," he said.

"Freud writes on that," said Cheryl.

"What?"

"Freud," Cheryl repeated, this time making a performance of it, as though she were speaking to a child. "Sigmund Freud: you may have heard of him."

Quaid's lip curled with unrestrained contempt. "Mother fixations don't answer the problem. The real terrors in me, in all of us, are pre-personality. Dread's there before we have any notion of ourselves as individuals. The thumb-nail, curled up on itself in the womb, feels fear."

"You remember do you?" said Cheryl.

"Maybe," Quaid replied, deadly serious.

"The womb?"

Quaid gave a sort of half-smile. Steve thought the smile said: "I have knowledge you don't."

It was a weird, unpleasant smile; one Steve wanted to wash off his eyes.

"You're a liar," said Cheryl, getting up from her seat, and looking down her nose at Quaid.

"Perhaps I am," he said, suddenly the perfect gentleman.

After that the debates stopped.

No more talking about nightmares, no more debating the things that go bump in the night. Steve saw Quaid irregularly for the next month, and when he did Quaid was invariably in the company of Cheryl Fromm. Quaid was polite with her, even deferential. He no longer wore his leather jacket, because she hated the smell of dead animal matter. This sudden change in their relationship confounded Stephen; but he put it down to his primitive understanding of sexual matters. He wasn't a virgin, but women were still a mystery to him: contradictory and puzzling.

He was also jealous, though he wouldn't entirely admit that to himself. He resented the fact that the wet dream genius was taking up so much of Quaid's time.

There was another feeling; a curious sense he had that Quaid was courting Cheryl for his own strange reasons. Sex was not Quaid's motive, he felt sure. Nor was it respect for Cheryl's intelligence that made him so attentive. No, he was cornering her somehow; that was Steve's instinct. Cheryl Fromm was being rounded up for the kill. Then, after a month, Quaid let a remark about Cheryl drop in conversation.

"She's a vegetarian," he said.

"Cheryl?"

"Of course, Cheryl."

"I know. She mentioned it before."

"Yes, but it isn't a fad with her. She's passionate about it. Can't even bear to look in a butcher's window. She won't touch meat, smell meat -”

"Oh." Steve was stumped. Where was this leading?

"Dread, Steve."

"Of meat?"

"The signs are different from person to person. She fears meat. She says she's so healthy, so balanced. Shit! I'll find-” "Find what?"

"The fear, Steve."

"You're not going to…?" Steve didn't know how to voice his anxiety without sounding accusatory. "Harm her?" said Quaid. "No, I'm not going to harm her in any way. Any damage done to her will be strictly self-inflicted."

Quaid was staring at him almost hypnotically. "It's about time we learnt to trust one another," Quaid went on. He leaned closer. "Between the two of us -”

"Listen, I don't think I want to hear."

"We have to touch the beast, Stephen."

"Damn the beast! I don't want to hear!"

Steve got up, as much to break the oppression of Quaid's stare as to finish the conversation.

"We're friends, Stephen."

"Yes…"

"Then respect that."

"What?"

"Silence. Not a word."

Steve nodded. That wasn't a difficult promise to keep. There was nobody he could tell his anxieties to without being laughed at.

Quaid looked satisfied. He hurried away, leaving Steve feeling as though he had unwillingly joined some secret society, for what purpose he couldn't begin to tell. Quaid had made a pact with him and it was unnerving. For the next week he cut all his lectures and most of his seminars. Notes went un-copied, books unread, essays unwritten. On the two occasions he actually went into the university building he crept around like a cautious mouse, praying he wouldn't collide with Quaid.

He needn't have feared. The one occasion he did see Quaid's stooping shoulders across the quadrangle he was involved in a smiling exchange with Cheryl Fromm. She laughed, musically, her pleasure echoing off the wall of the History Department. The jealousy had left Steve altogether. He wouldn't have been paid to be so near to Quaid, so intimate with him.

The time he spent alone, away from the bustle of lectures and overfull corridors, gave Steve's mind time to idle. His thoughts returned, like tongue to tooth, like fingernail to scab, to his fears.

And so to his childhood.

At the age of six, Steve had been struck by a car. The injuries were not particularly bad, but concussion left him partially deaf. It was a profoundly distressing experience for him; not understanding why he was suddenly cut off from the world. It was an inexplicable torment, and the child assumed it was eternal.

One moment his life had been real, full of shouts and laughter. The next he was cut off from it, and the external world became an aquarium, full of gaping fish with grotesque smiles. Worse still, there were times when he suffered what the doctors called tinnitus, a roaring or ringing sound in the ears. His head would fill with the most outlandish noises, whoops and whistlings, that played like sound-effects to the flailings of the outside world. At those times his stomach would churn, and a band of iron would be wrapped around his forehead, crushing his thoughts into fragments, dissociating head from hand, intention from practice. He would be swept away in a tide of panic, completely unable to make sense of the world while his head

sang and rattled.

But at night came the worst terrors. He would wake, sometimes, in what had been (before the accident) the reassuring womb of his bedroom, to find the ringing had begun in his sleep.

His eyes would jerk open. His body would be wet with sweat. His mind would be filled with the most raucous din, which he was locked in with, beyond hope of reprieve. Nothing could silence his head, and nothing, it seemed, could bring the world, the speaking, laughing, crying world back to him.

He was alone.

That was the beginning, middle and end of the dread. He was absolutely alone with his cacophony. Locked in this house, in this room, in this body, in this head, a prisoner of deaf, blind flesh.

It was almost unbearable. In the night the boy would sometimes cry out, not knowing he was making any sound, and the fish who had been his parents would turn on the light and come to try and help him, bending over his bed making faces, their soundless mouths forming ugly shapes in their attempts to help. Their touches would calm him at last; with time his mother learned the trick of soothing away the panic that swept over him.

A week before his seventh birthday his hearing returned, not perfectly, but well enough for it to seem like a miracle. The world snapped back into focus; and life began afresh.

It took several months for the boy to trust his senses again. He would still wake in the night, half-anticipating the head-noises.

But though his ears would ring at the slightest volume of sound, preventing Steve from going to rock concerts with the rest of the students, he now scarcely ever noticed his slight deafness.

He remembered, of course. Very well. He could bring back the taste of his panic; the feel of the iron band around his head. And there was a residue of fear there; of the dark, of being alone.

But then, wasn't everyone afraid to be alone? To be utterly alone.

Steve had another fear now, far more difficult to pin down.

Quaid.

In a drunken revelation session he had told Quaid about his childhood, about the deafness, about the night terrors. Quaid knew about his weakness: the clear route into the heart of Steve's dread. He had a weapon, a stick to beat Steve with, should it ever come to that. Maybe that was why he chose not to speak to Cheryl (warn her, was that what he wanted to do?) and certainly that was why he avoided Quaid.

The man had a look, in certain moods, of malice. Nothing more or less. He looked like a man with malice deep, deep in him.

Maybe those four months of watching people with the sound turned down had sensitized Steve to the tiny glances, sneers and smiles that flit across people's faces. He knew Quaid's life was a labyrinth; a map of its complexities was etched on his face in a thousand tiny expressions.

The next phase of Steve's initiation into Quaid's secret world didn't come for almost three and a half months. The university broke for the summer recess, and the students went their ways. Steve took his usual vacation job at his father's printing works; it was long hours, and physically exhausting, but an undeniable relief for him. Academe had overstuffed his mind, he felt force-fed with words and ideas. The print work sweated all of that out of him rapidly, sorting out the jumble in his mind.

It was a good time: he scarcely thought of Quaid at all.

He returned to campus in the late September. The students were still thin on the ground. Most of the courses didn't start for another week; and there was a melancholy air about the place without its usual melee of complaining, flirting, arguing kids.

Steve was in the library, cornering a few important books before others on his course had their hands on them. Books were pure gold at the beginning of term, with reading lists to be checked off, and the university book shop forever claiming the necessary titles were on order. They would invariably arrive, those vital books, two days after the seminar in which the author was to be discussed. This final year Steve was determined to be ahead of the rush for the few copies of seminal works the library possessed.

The familiar voice spoke.

"Early to work."

Steve looked up to meet Quaid's pin-prick eyes.

"I'm impressed, Steve."

"What with?"

"Your enthusiasm for the job."

"Oh."

Quaid smiled. "What are you looking for?"

"Something on Bentham."

"I've got "Principles of Morals and Legislation'. Will that do?"

It was a trap. No: that was absurd. He was offering a book; how could that simple gesture be construed as a trap? "Come to think of it," the smile broadened, "I think it's the library copy I've got. I'll give it to you." "Thanks."

"Good holiday?"

"Yes. Thank you. You?"

"Very rewarding."

The smile had decayed into a thin line beneath his -”You've grown a moustache."

It was an unhealthy example of the species. Thin, patchy, and dirty-blond, it wandered back and forth under Quaid's nose as if looking for a way off his face. Quaid looked faintly embarrassed.

"Was it for Cheryl?"

He was definitely embarrassed now.

"Well…"

"Sounds like you had a good vacation."

The embarrassment was surmounted by something else.

"I've got some wonderful photographs," Quaid said.

"What of?"

"Holiday snaps."

Steve couldn't believe his ears. Had C. Fromm tamed the Quaid? Holiday snaps?

"You won't believe some of them."

There was something of the Arab selling dirty postcards about Quaid's manner. What the hell were these photographs? Split beaver shots of Cheryl, caught reading Kant?

"I don't think of you as being a photographer."

"It's become a passion of mine."

He grinned as he said 'passion'. There was a barely-suppressed excitement in his manner. He was positively gleaming with pleasure.

"You've got to come and see them."

"I-"

"Tonight. And pick up the Bentham at the same time."

"Thanks."

"I've got a house for myself these days. Round the corner from the Maternity Hospital, in Pilgrim Street. Number sixty-four. Sometime after nine?"

"Right. Thanks. Pilgrim Street." Quaid nodded.

"I didn't know there were any habitable houses in Pilgrim Street."

"Number sixty-four."

Pilgrim Street was on its knees. Most of the houses were already rubble. A few were in the process of being knocked down. Their inside walls were unnaturally exposed; pink and pale green wallpapers, fireplaces on upper storeys hanging over chasms of smoking brick. Stairs leading from nowhere to nowhere, and back again. Number sixty-four stood on its own. The houses in the terrace to either side had been demolished and bull-dozed away, leaving a desert of impacted brick-dust which a few hardy, and fool-hardy, weeds had tried to populate. A three-legged white dog was patrolling its territory along the side of sixty-four, leaving little piss-marks at regular intervals as signs of its ownership.

Quaid's house, though scarcely palatial, was more welcoming than the surrounding wasteland. They drank some bad red wine together, which Steve had brought with him, and they smoked some grass. Quaid was far more mellow than Steve had ever seen him before, quite happy to talk trivia instead of dread; laughing occasionally; even telling a dirty joke. The interior of the house was bare to the point of being spartan. No pictures on the walls; no decoration of any kind. Quaid's books, and there were literally hundreds of them, were piled on the floor in no particular sequence that Steve could make out. The kitchen and bathroom were primitive. The whole atmosphere was almost monastic.

After a couple of easy hours, Steve's curiosity got the better of him.

"Where's the holiday snaps, then?" he said, aware that he was slurring his words a little, and no longer giving a shit. "Oh yes. My experiment."

"Experiment?"

"Tell you the truth, Steve, I'm not so sure I should show them to you."

"Why not?"

"I'm into serious stuff, Steve."

"And I'm not ready for serious stuff, is that what you're saying?"

Steve could feel Quaid's technique working on him, even though it was transparently obvious what he was doing. "I didn't say you weren't ready -" "What the hell is this stuff?" "Pictures."

"Of?"

"You remember Cheryl." Pictures of Cheryl. Ha.

"How could I forget?"

"She won't be coming back this term."

"Oh."

"She had a revelation." Quaid's stare was basilisk-like.

"What do you mean?"

"She was always so calm, wasn't she?" Quaid was talking about her as though she were dead. "Calm, cool and collected."

"Yes, I suppose she was."

"Poor bitch. All she wanted was a good fuck."

Steve smirked like a kid at Quaid's dirty talk. It was a little shocking; like seeing teacher with his dick hanging out of his trousers.

"She spent some of the vacation here."

"Here?"

"In this house."

"You like her then?"

"She's an ignorant cow. She's pretentious, she's weak, she's stupid. But she wouldn't give, she wouldn't give a fucking thing."

"You mean she wouldn't screw?"

"Oh no, she'd strip off her knickers soon as look at you. It was her fears she wouldn't give -"

Same old song.

"But I persuaded her, in the fullness of time."

Quaid pulled out a box from behind a pile of philosophy books. In it was a sheaf of black and white photographs, blown up to twice postcard size. He passed the first one of the series over to Steve.

"I locked her away you see, Steve." Quaid was as unemotional as a newsreader. "To see if I could needle her into showing her dread a little bit."

"What do you mean, locked her away?"

"Upstairs."

Steve felt strange. He could hear his ears singing, very quietly. Bad wine always made his head ring. "I locked her away upstairs," Quaid said again, “as an experiment. That's why I took this house. No neighbours to hear."

No neighbours to hear what?

Steve looked at the grainy image in his hand.

"Concealed camera," said Quaid, "She never knew I was photographing her."

Photograph one was of a small, featureless room. A little plain furniture.

"That's the room. Top of the house. Warm. A bit stuffy even. No noise."

No noise.

Quaid proffered Photograph Two.

Same room. Now most of the furniture had been removed. A sleeping bag was laid along one wall. A table. A chair. A bare light bulb.

"That's how I laid it out for her."

"It looks like a cell."

Quaid grunted.

Photograph Three. The same room. On the table a jug of water. In the corner of the room, a bucket, roughly covered with a towel.

"What's the bucket for?"

"She had to piss."

"Yes."

"All amenities provided," said Quaid. "I didn't intend to reduce her to an animal."

Even in his drunken state, Steve took Quaid's inference.

He didn't intend to reduce her to an animal. However.

Photograph Four. On the table, on an unpatterned plate, a slab of meat. A bone sticks out from it. "Beef," said Quaid.

"But she's a vegetarian."

"So she is. It's slightly salted, well-cooked, good beef." Photograph Five. The same. Cheryl is in the room. The door is closed. She is kicking the door, her foot and fist and face a blur of fury.

"I put her in the room about five in the morning. She was sleeping: I carried her over the threshold myself.

Very romantic. She didn't know what the hell was going on."

"You locked her in there?"

"Of course. An experiment."

"She knew nothing about it?"

"We'd talked about dread, you know me. She knew what I wanted to discover. Knew I wanted guinea-pigs. She soon caught on. Once she realized what I was up to she calmed down."

Photograph Six. Cheryl sits in the corner of the room, thinking.

"I think she believed she could out-wait me."

Photograph Seven. Cheryl looks at the leg of beef, glancing at it on the table.

"Nice photo, don't you think? Look at the expression of disgust on her face. She hated even the smell of cooked meat. She wasn't hungry then, of course."

Eight: she sleeps.

Nine: she pisses. Steve felt uncomfortable, watching the girl squatting on the bucket, knickers round her ankles. Tearstains on her face.

Ten: she drinks water from the jug.

Eleven: she sleeps again, back to the room, curled up like a fetus.

"How long has she been in the room?"

"This was only fourteen hours in. She lost orientation as to time very quickly. No light change, you see. Her body clock was fucked up pretty soon."

"How long was she in here?"

"'Till the point was proved."

Twelve: Awake, she cruises the meat on the table, caught surreptitiously glancing down at it.

"This was taken the following morning. I was asleep: the camera just took pictures every quarter hour. Look at her eyes…"

Steve peered more closely at the photograph. There was a certain desperation on Cheryl's face: a haggard, wild look. The way she stared at the beef she could have been trying to hypnotize it.

"She looks sick."

"She's tired, that's all. She slept a lot, as it happened, but it seemed just to make her more exhausted than ever. She doesn't know now if it's day or night. And she's hungry of course. It's been a day and a half. She's more than a little peckish."

Thirteen: she sleeps again, curled into an even tighter ball, as though she wanted to swallow herself. Fourteen: she drinks more water.

"I replaced the jug when she was asleep. She slept deeply: I could have done a jig in there and it wouldn't have woken her. Lost to the world."

He grinned. Mad, thought Steve, the man's mad.

"God, it stank in there. You know how women smell sometimes: it's not sweat, it's something else. Heavy odour: meaty. Bloody. She came on towards the end of her time. Hadn't planned it that way."

Fifteen: she touches the meat.

"This is where the cracks begin to show," said Quaid, with quiet triumph in his voice. "This is where the dread begins."

Steve studied the photograph closely. The grain of the print blurred the detail, but the cool mama was in pain, that was for sure. Her face was knotted up, half in desire, half in repulsion, as she touched the food. Sixteen: she was at the door again, throwing herself at it, every part of her body flailing. Her mouth a black blur of angst, screaming at the blank door.

"She always ended up haranguing me, whenever she'd had a

confrontation with the meat."

"How long is this?"

"Coming up for three days. You're looking at a hungry woman."

It wasn't difficult to see that. The next photo she stood still in the middle of the room, averting her eyes from the temptation of the food, her entire body tensed with the dilemma.

"You're starving her."

"She can go ten days without eating quite easily. Fasts are common in any civilized country, Steve. Sixty per cent of the British population is clinically obese at any one time. She was too fat anyhow."

Eighteen: she sits, the fat girl, in her corner of the room, weeping.

"About now she began to hallucinate. Just little mental ticks. She thought she felt something in her hair, or on the back of her hand. I'd see her staring into mid-air sometimes watching nothing."

Nineteen: she washes herself. She is stripped to the waist, her breasts are heavy, her face is drained of expression. The meat is a darker tone than in the previous photographs.

"She washed herself regularly. Never let twelve hours go by without washing from head to toe." "The meat looks…"

"Ripe?"

"Dark."

"It's quite warm in her little room; and there's a few flies in there with her. They've found the meat: laid their eggs. Yes, it's ripening up quite nicely."

"Is that part of the plan?"

"Sure. If the meat revolted when it was fresh, what about her disgust at rotted meat? That's the crux of her dilemma, isn't it? The longer she waits to eat, the more disgusted she becomes with what she's been given to feed on. She's trapped with her own horror of meat on the one hand, and her dread of dying on the other. Which is going to give first?"

Steve was no less trapped now.

On the one hand this joke had already gone too far, and Quaid's experiment had become an exercise in sadism. On the other hand he wanted to know how far this story ended. There was an undeniable fascination in watching the woman suffer.

The next seven photographs – twenty, twenty-one, two, three, four, five and six pictured the same circular routine. Sleeping, washing, pissing, meat-watching. Sleeping, washing, pissing -Then twenty-seven.

"See?"

She picks up the meat.

Yes, she picks it up, her face full of horror. The haunch of the beef looks well-ripened now, speckled with flies' eggs. Gross.

"She bites it."

The next photograph, and her face is buried in the meat.

Steve seemed to taste the rotten flesh in the back of his throat. His mind found a stench to imagine, and created a gravy of putrescence to run over his tongue. How could she do it?

Twenty-nine: she is vomiting in the bucket in the corner of the room.

Thirty: she is sitting looking at the table. It is empty. The water-jug has been thrown against the wall. The plate has been smashed. The beef lies on the floor in a slime of degeneration.

Thirty-one: she sleeps. Her head is lost in a tangle of arms.

Thirty-two: she is standing up. She is looking at the meat again, defying it. The hunger she feels is plain on her face. So is the disgust.

Thirty-three. She sleeps.

"How long now?" asked Steve.

"Five days. No, six."

Six days.

Thirty-four. She is a blurred figure, apparently flinging herself against a wall. Perhaps beating her head against it, Steve couldn't be

sure. He was past asking. Part of him didn't want to know.

Thirty-five: she is again sleeping, this time beneath the table. The sleeping bag has been torn to pieces, shredded cloth and pieces of stuffing littering the room.

Thirty-six: she speaks to the door, through the door, knowing she will get no answer.

Thirty-seven: she eats the rancid meat.

Calmly she sits under the table, like a primitive in her cave, and pulls at the meat with her incisors. Her face is again expressionless; all her energy is bent to the purpose of the moment. To eat. To eat 'til the hunger disappears, 'til the agony in her belly, and the sickness in her head disappear.

Steve stared at the photograph.

"It startled me," said Quaid, "how suddenly she gave in. One moment she seemed to have as much resistance as ever. The monologue at the door was the same mixture of threats and apologies as she'd delivered day in, day out. Then she broke. Just like that. Squatted under the table and ate the beef down to the bone, as though it were a choice cut."

Thirty-eight: she sleeps. The door is open. Light pours in.

Thirty-nine: the room is empty.

"Where did she go?"

"She wandered downstairs. She came into the kitchen, drank several glasses of water, and sat in a chair for three or four hours without saying a word."

"Did you speak to her?"

"Eventually. When she started to come out of her fugue state. The experiment was over. I didn't want to hurt her." "What did she say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing at all. For a long time I don't believe she was even aware of my presence in the room. Then I cooked some potatoes, which she

ate."

"She didn't try and call the police?" "No."

"No violence?"

"No. She knew what I'd done, and why I'd done it. It wasn't pre-planned, but we'd talked about such experiments, in abstract conversations. She hadn't come to any harm, you see. She'd lost a bit of weight perhaps, but that was about all."

"Where is she now?"

"She left the day after. I don't know where she went."

"And what did it all prove?"

"Nothing at all, perhaps. But it made an interesting start to my investigations."

"Start? This was only a start?"

There was plain disgust for Quaid in Steve's voice.

"Stephen -"

"You could have killed her!"

"No."

"She could have lost her mind. Unbalanced her permanently."

"Possibly. But unlikely. She was a strong-willed woman."

"But you broke her."

"Yes. It was a journey she was ready to take. We'd talked of going to face her fear. So here was I, arranging for Cheryl to do just that. Nothing much really."

"You forced her to do it. She wouldn't have gone otherwise."

"True. It was an education for her."

"So now you're a teacher?"

Steve wished he'd been able to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. But it was there. Sarcasm; anger; and a little fear. "Yes, I'm a teacher,"

Quaid replied, looking at Steve obliquely, his eyes not focused. "I'm teaching people dread." Steve stared at the floor. "Are you satisfied with what you've taught?"

"And learned, Steve. I've learned too. It's a very exciting prospect: a world of fears to investigate. Especially with intelligent subjects. Even in the face of rationalization -"

Steve stood up. "I don't want to hear any more."

"Oh? OK."

"I've got classes early tomorrow."

"No."

"What?"

A beat, faltering.

"No. Don't go yet."

"Why?" His heart was racing. He feared Quaid, he'd never realized how profoundly.

"I've got some more books to give you."

Steve felt his face flush. Slightly. What had he thought in that moment? That Quaid was going to bring him down with a rugby tackle and start experimenting on his fears?

No. Idiot thoughts.

"I've got a book on Kierkegaard you'll like. Upstairs. I'll be two minutes."

Smiling, Quaid left the room.

Steve squatted on his haunches and began to sheaf through the photographs again. It was the moment when Cheryl first picked up the rotting meat that fascinated him most. Her face wore an expression completely uncharacteristic of the woman he had known. Doubt was written there, and confusion, and deep -Dread.

It was Quaid's word. A dirty word. An obscene word, associated from this night on with Quaid's torture of an innocent girl.

For a moment Steve thought of the expression on his own face, as he stared down at the photograph. Was there not some of the same confusion on his face? And perhaps some of the dread too, waiting for release. He heard a sound behind him, too soft to be Quaid.

Unless he was creeping.

Oh, God, unless he was -A pad of chloroformed cloth was clamped over Steve's mouth and his nostrils. Involuntarily, he inhaled and the vapours stung his sinuses, made his eyes water. A blob of blackness appeared at the corner of the world, just out of sight, and it started to grow, this stain, pulsing to the rhythm of his quickening heart.

In the centre of Steve's head he could see Quaid's voice as a veil. It said his name.

"Stephen."

Again.

"- ephen."

"- phen."

"- hen."

"en."

The stain was the world. The world was dark, gone away. Out of sight, out of mind.

Steve fell clumsily amongst the photographs.

When he woke up he was unaware of his consciousness. There was darkness everywhere, on all sides. He lay awake for an hour with his eyes wide before he realized they were open.

Experimentally, he moved first, his arms and his legs, then his head. He wasn't bound as he'd expected, except by his ankle. There was definitely a chain or something similar around his left ankle. It chafed his skin when he tried to move too far.

The floor beneath him was very uncomfortable, and when he investigated it more closely with the palm of his hand he realized he was lying on a huge grille or grid of some kind. It was metal, and its regular surface spread in every direction as far as his arms would reach. When he poked his arm down through the holes in this lattice

he touched nothing. Just empty air falling away beneath him.

The first infra-red photographs Quaid took of Stephen's confinement pictured his exploration. As Quaid had expected the subject was being quite rational about his situation. No hysterics. No curses. No tears. That was the challenge of this particular subject. He knew precisely what was going on; and he would respond logically to his fears. That would surely make a more difficult mind to break than Cheryl's.

But how much more rewarding the results would be when he did crack. Would his soul not open up then, for Quaid to see and touch? There was so much there, in the man's interior, he wanted to study. Gradually Steve's eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

He was imprisoned in what appeared to be some kind of shaft. It was, he estimated, about twenty feet wide, and completely round. Was it some kind of air-shaft, for a tunnel, or an underground factory? Steve's mind mapped the area around Pilgrim Street, trying to pinpoint the most likely place for Quaid to have taken him. He could think of nowhere.

Nowhere.

He was lost in a place he couldn't fix or recognize. The shaft had no corners to focus his eyes on; and the walls offered no crack or hole to hide his consciousness in.

Worse, he was lying spread-eagled on a grid that hung over this shaft. His eyes could make no impression on the darkness beneath him: it seemed that the shaft might be bottomless. And there was only the thin network of the grill, and the fragile chain that shackled his ankle to it, between him and falling.

He pictured himself poised under an empty black sky, and over an infinite darkness. The air was warm and stale. It dried up the tears that had suddenly sprung to his eyes, leaving them gummy. When he began to shout for help, which he did after the tears had passed, the darkness ate his words easily.

Having yelled himself hoarse, he lay back on the lattice. He couldn't help but imagine that beyond his frail bed, the darkness went on forever. It was absurd, of course. Nothing goes on forever, he said aloud.

Nothing goes on forever.

And yet, he'd never know. If he fell in the absolute blackness beneath him, he'd fall and fall and fall and not see the bottom of the shaft coming. Though he tried to think of brighter, more positive, images, his mind conjured his body cascading down this horrible shaft, with the bottom a foot from his hurtling body and his eyes not seeing it, his brain not predicting it.

Until he hit.

Would he see light as his head was dashed open on impact? Would he understand, in the moment that his body became offal, why he'd lived and died?

Then he thought: Quaid wouldn't dare. "Wouldn't dare!" he screeched. "Wouldn't dare!"

The dark was a glutton for words. As soon as he'd yelled into it, it was as though he'd never made a sound. And then another thought: a real baddie. Suppose Quaid had found this circular hell to put him in because it would never be found, never be investigated? Maybe he wanted to take his experiment to the limits.

To the limits. Death was at the limits. And wouldn't that be the ultimate experiment for Quaid? Watching a man die: watching the fear of death, the mother lode of dread, approach. Sartre had written that no man could ever know his own death. But to know the deaths of others, intimately to watch the acrobatics that the mind would surely perform to avoid the bitter truth – that was a clue to death's nature, wasn't it? That might, in some small way, prepare a man for his own death. To live another's dread vicariously was the safest, cleverest way to touch the beast. Yes, he thought, Quaid might kill me; out of his own tenor.

Steve took a sour satisfaction in that thought. That Quaid, the impartial experimenter, the would-be educator, was obsessed with terrors because his own dread ran deepest.

That was why he had to watch others deal with their fears. He needed a solution, a way out for himself.

Thinking all this through took hours. In the darkness Steve's mind was quick-silver, but uncontrollable. He found it difficult to keep one train of argument for very long. His thoughts were like fish, small, fast fish, wriggling out of his grasp as soon as he took a hold of them.

But underlying every twist of thought was the knowledge that he

must out-play Quaid. That was certain. He must be calm; prove himself a useless subject for Quaid's analysis.

The photographs of these hours showed Stephen lying with his eyes closed on the grid, with a slight frown on his face. Occasionally, paradoxically, a smile would flit across his lips. Sometimes it was impossible to know if he was sleeping or waking, thinking or dreaming.

Quaid waited.

Eventually Steve's eyes began to flicker under his lids, the unmistakable sign of dreaming. It was time, while the subject slept, to turn the wheel of the rack -Steve woke with his hands cuffed together. He could see a bowl of water on a plate beside him; and a second bowl, full of luke-warm unsalted porridge, beside it. He ate and drank thankfully.

As he ate, two things registered. First, that the noise of his eating seemed very loud in his head; and second, that he felt a construction, a tightness, around his temples.

The photographs show Stephen clumsily reaching up to his head. A harness is strapped on to him, and locked in place. It clamps plugs deep into his ears, preventing any sound from getting in.

The photographs show puzzlement. Then anger. Then fear.

Steve was deaf.

All he could hear were the noises in his head. The clicking of his teeth. The slush and swallow of his palate. The sounds boomed between his ears like guns.

Tears sprang to his eyes. He kicked at the grid, not hearing the clatter of his heels on the metal bars. He screamed until his throat felt as if it was bleeding. He heard none of his cries.

Panic began in him.

The photographs showed its birth. His face was flushed. His eyes were wide, his teeth and gums exposed in a grimace.

He looked like a frightened monkey.

All the familiar, childhood feelings swept over him. He remembered

them like the faces of old enemies; the chittering limbs, the sweat, the nausea. In desperation he picked up the bowl of water and upturned it over his face. The shock of the cold water diverted his mind momentarily from the panic-ladder it was climbing. He lay back down on the grid, his body a board, and told himself to breathe deeply and evenly.

Relax, relax, relax, he said aloud.

In his head, he could hear his tongue clicking. He could hear his mucus too, moving sluggishly in the panic constricted passages of his nose, blocking and unblocking in his ears. Now he could detect the low, soft hiss that waited under all the other noises. The sound of his mind -It was like the white noise between stations on the radio, this was the same whine that came to fetch him under anesthetic, the same noise that would sound in his ears on the borders of sleep.

His limbs still twitched nervously, and he was only half-aware of the way he wrestled with his handcuffs, indifferent to their edges scouring the skin at his wrists.

The photographs recorded all these reactions precisely. His war with hysteria: his pathetic attempts to keep the fears from resurfacing. His tears. His bloody wrists.

Eventually, exhaustion won over panic; as it had so often as a child. How many times had he fallen asleep with the salt-taste of tears in his nose and mouth, unable to fight any longer?

The exertion had heightened the pitch of his head-noises. Now, instead of a lullaby, his brain whistled and whooped him to sleep.

Oblivion was good.

Quaid was disappointed. It was clear from the speed of his response that Stephen Grace was going to break very soon indeed. In fact, he was as good as broken, only a few hours into the experiment. And Quaid had been relying on Stephen. After months of preparing the ground, it seemed that this subject was going to lose his mind without giving up a single clue.

One word, one miserable word was all Quaid needed. A little sign as to the nature of the experience. Or better still, something to suggest a solution, a healing totem, a prayer even. Surely some Saviour comes to the lips, as the personality is swept away in madness? There must be something.

Quaid waited like a carrion bird at the site of some atrocity, counting the minutes left to the expiring soul, hoping for a morsel.

Steve woke face down on the grid. The air was much staler now, and the metal bars bit into the flesh of his cheek. He was hot and uncomfortable.

He lay still, letting his eyes become accustomed to his surroundings again. The lines of the grid ran off in perfect perspective to meet the wall of the shaft. The simple network of criss-crossed bars struck him as pretty. Yes, pretty. He traced the lines back and forth 'til he tired of the game. Bored, he rolled over onto his back, feeling the grid vibrate under his body. Was it less stable now? It seemed to rock a little as he moved.

Hot and sweaty, Steve unbuttoned his shirt. There was sleep-spittle on his chin but he didn't care to wipe it off. What if he drooled? Who was to see?

He half pulled off his shirt, and using one foot, kicked his shoe off the other.

Shoe: lattice: fall. Sluggishly, his mind made the connection. He sat up. Oh poor shoe. His shoe would fall. It would slip between the bars and be lost. But no. It was finely balanced across two sides of a lattice-hole; he could still save it if he tried.

He reached for his poor, poor shoe, and his movement shifted the grid.

The shoe began to slip.

"Please," he begged it, “don't fall." He didn't want to lose his nice shoe, his pretty shoe. It mustn't fall. It mustn't fall. As he stretched to snatch it, the shoe tipped, heel down, through the grid and fell into the darkness. He let out a cry of loss that he couldn't hear.

Oh, if only he could listen to the shoe falling; to count the seconds of its descent. To hear it thud home at the bottom of the shaft. At least then he'd know how far he had to fall to his death.

He couldn't endure it any longer. He rolled over on to his stomach and thrust both arms through the grid, screaming: "I'll go too! I'll go too!"

He couldn't bear waiting to fall, in the dark, in the whining silence,

he just wanted to follow his shoe down, down, down the dark shaft to extinction, and have the whole game finished once and for all.

"I'll go! I'll go! I'll go!" he shrieked. He pleaded with gravity.

Beneath him, the grid moved.

Something had broken. A pin, a chain, a rope that held the grid in position had snapped. He was no' longer horizontal; already he was sliding across the bars as they tipped him off into the dark.

With shock he realized his limbs were no longer chained.

He would fall.

The man wanted him to fall. The bad man – what was his name? Quake? Quail? Quarrel? Automatically he seized the grid with both hands as it tipped even further over. Maybe he didn't want to fall after his shoe, after all? Maybe life, a little moment more of life, was worth holding on to -The dark beyond the edge of the grid was so deep; and who could guess what lurked in it?

In his head the noises of his panic multiplied. The thumping of his bloody heart, the stutter of his mucus, the dry rasp of his palate. His palms, slick with sweat, were losing their grip. Gravity wanted him. It demanded its rights of his body's bulk: demanded that he fall. For a moment, glancing over his shoulder at the mouth that opened under him, he thought he saw monsters stirring below him. Ridiculous, loony things, crudely drawn, dark on dark. Vile graffiti leered up from his childhood and uncurled their claws to snatch at his legs.

"Mama," he said, as his hands failed him, and he was delivered into dread.

"Mama."

That was the word. Quaid heard it plainly, in all its banality.

"Mama!"

By the time Steve hit the bottom of the shaft, he was past judging how far he'd fallen. The moment his hands let go of the grid, and he knew the dark would have him, his mind snapped. The animal self survived to relax his body, saving him all but minor injury on impact. The rest of his life, all but the simplest responses, were shattered, the pieces flung into the recesses of his memory.

When the light came, at last, he looked up at the person in the Mickey Mouse mask at the door, and smiled at him. It was a child's smile, one of thankfulness for his comical rescuer. He let the man take him by the ankles and haul him out of the big round room in which he was lying. His pants were wet, and he knew he'd dirtied himself in his sleep. Still, the Funny Mouse would kiss him better.

His head lolled on his shoulders as he was dragged out of the torture-chamber. On the floor beside his head was a shoe. And seven or eight feet above him was the grid from which he had fallen.

It meant nothing at all.

He let the Mouse sit him down in a bright room. He let the Mouse give him his ears back, though he didn't really want them. It was funny watching the world without sound, it made him laugh.

He drank some water, and ate some sweet cake.

He was tired. He wanted to sleep. He wanted his Mama. But the Mouse didn't seem to understand, so he cried, and kicked the table and threw the plates and cups on the floor. Then he ran into the next room, and threw all the papers he could find in the air. It was nice watching them flutter up and flutter down. Some of them fell face down, some face up. Some were covered with writing. Some were pictures. Horrid pictures. Pictures that made him feel very strange.

They were all pictures of dead people, every one of them. Some of the pictures were of little children, others were of grown-up children. They were lying down, or half-sitting, and there were big cuts in their faces and their bodies, cuts that showed a mess underneath, a mish-mash of shiny bits and oozy bits. And all around the dead people: black paint. Not in neat puddles, but splashed all around, and finger-marked, and hand-printed and very messy. In three or four of the pictures the thing that made the cuts was still there. He knew the word for it. Axe.

There was an axe in a lady's face buried almost to the handle. There was an axe in a man's leg, and another lying on the floor of a kitchen beside a dead baby.

This man collected pictures of dead people and axes, which Steve thought was strange.

That was his last thought before the too-familiar scent of chloroform filled his head and he lost consciousness.

The sordid doorway smelt of old urine and fresh vomit. It was his own vomit; it was all over the front of his shirt. He tried to stand up, but his legs felt wobbly. It was very cold. His throat hurt.

Then he heard footsteps. It sounded like the Mouse was coming back. Maybe he'd take him home. "Get up, son."

It wasn't the Mouse. It was a policeman.

"What are you doing down there? I said get up."

Bracing himself against the crumbling brick of the doorway Steve got to his feet. The policeman shone his torch at him.

"Jesus Christ," said the policeman, disgust written over his face. "You're in a right fucking state. Where do you live?"

Steve shook his head, staring down at his vomit-soaked shirt like a shamed schoolboy.

"What's your name?"

He couldn't quite remember.

"Name, lad?"

He was trying. If only the policeman wouldn't shout.

"Come on, take a hold of yourself."

The words didn't make much sense. Steve could feel tears pricking the backs of his eyes.

"Home."

Now he was blubbering, sniffing snot, feeling utterly forsaken. He wanted to die: he wanted to lie down and die. The policeman shook him.

"You high on something?" he demanded, pulling Steve into the glare of the streetlights and staring at his tear-stained face.

"You'd better move on."

"Mama," said Steve, "I want my Mama."

The words changed the encounter entirely.

Suddenly the policeman found the spectacle more than disgusting; more than pitiful. This little bastard, with his bloodshot eyes and his dinner down his shirt was really getting on his nerves. Too much money, too much dirt in his veins, too little discipline.

"Mama' was the last straw. He punched Steve in the stomach, a neat, sharp, functional blow. Steve doubled up, whimpering.

"Shut up, son."

Another blow finished the job of crippling the child, and then he took a fistful of Steve's hair and pulled the little druggy's face up to meet his.

"You want to be a derelict, is that it?"

"No. No."

Steve didn't know what a derelict was; he just wanted to make the policeman like him.

"Please," he said, tears coming again, “take me home." The policeman seemed confused. The kid hadn't started fighting back and calling for civil rights, the way most of them did. That was the way they usually ended up: on the ground, bloody-nosed, calling for a social worker. This one just wept. The policeman began to get a bad feeling about the kid. Like he was mental or something. And he'd beaten the shit out of the little snot. Fuck it. Now he felt responsible. He took hold of Steve by the arm and bundled him across the road to his car.

"Get in."

"Take me -”

"I'll take you home, son. I'll take you home."

At the Night Hostel they searched Steve's clothes for some kind of identification, found none, then scoured his body for fleas, his hair for nits. The policeman left him then, which Steve was relieved about. He hadn't liked the man. The people at the Hostel talked about him as though he wasn't in the room. Talked about how young he was; discussed his mental-age; his clothes; his appearance. Then they gave him a bar of soap and showed him the showers. He stood under the cold water for ten minutes and dried himself with a stained towel. He didn't shave, though they'd lent him a razor. He'd forgotten how to do

it.

Then they gave him some old clothes, which he liked. They weren't such bad people, even if they did talk about him as though he wasn't there. One of them even smiled at him; a burly man with a grizzled beard. Smiled as he would at a dog.

They were odd clothes he was given. Either too big or too small. All colours: yellow socks, dirty white shirt, pinstripe trousers that had been made for a glutton, a thread-bare sweater, heavy boots. He liked dressing up, putting on two vests and two pairs of socks when they weren't looking. He felt reassured with several thicknesses of cotton and wool wrapped around him.

Then they left him with a ticket for his bed in his hand, to wait for the dormitories to be unlocked. He was not impatient, like some of the men in the corridors with him. They yelled incoherently, many of them, their accusations laced with obscenities, and they spat at each other. It frightened him. All he wanted was to sleep. To lie down and sleep.

At eleven o'clock one of the warders unlocked the gate to the dormitory, and all the lost men filed through to find themselves an iron bed for the night. The dormitory, which was large and badly-lit, stank of disinfectant and old people.

Avoiding the eyes and the flailing arms of the other derelicts, Steve found himself an ill-made bed, with one thin blanket tossed across it, and lay down to sleep. All around him men were coughing and muttering and weeping. One was saying his prayers as he lay, staring at the ceiling, on his grey pillow. Steve thought that was a good idea. So he said his own child's prayer.

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, Look upon this little child, Pity my… What was the word?

Pity my – simplicity, suffer me to come to thee."

That made him feel better; and the sleep, a balm, was blue and deep.

Quaid sat in darkness. The terror was on him again, worse than ever. His body was rigid with fear; so much so that he couldn't even get out of bed and snap on the light. Besides, what if this time, this time of all times, the tenor was true? What if the axe-man was at the door in flesh and blood? Grinning like a loon at him, dancing like the

devil at the top of the stairs, as Quaid had seen him, in dreams, dancing and grinning, grinning and dancing. Nothing moved. No creak of the stair, no giggle in the shadows. It wasn't him, after all. Quaid would live 'til morning.

His body had relaxed a little now. He swung his legs out of bed and switched on the light. The room was indeed empty. The house was silent. Through the open door he could see the top of the stairs. There was no axe-man, of course.

Steve woke to shouting. It was still dark. He didn't know how long he'd been asleep, but his limbs no longer ached so badly. Elbows on his pillow, he half-sat up and stared down the dormitory to see what all the commotion was about. Four bed-rows down from his, two men were fighting. The bone of contention was by no means clear. They just grappled with each other like girls (it made Steve laugh to watch them), screeching and puffing each other's hair. By moonlight the blood on their faces and hands was black.

One of them, the older of the two, was thrust back across his bed, screaming: "I will not go to the Finchley Road! You will not make me. Don't strike me! I'm not your man! I'm not!"

The other was beyond listening; he was too stupid, or too mad, to understand that the old man was begging to be left alone. Urged on by spectators on every side, the old man's assailant had taken off his shoe and was be labouring his victim with it. Steve could hear the crack, crack of his blows: heel on head. There were cheers accompanying each strike, and lessening cries from the old man.

Suddenly, the applause faltered, as somebody came into the dormitory. Steve couldn't see who it was; the mass of men crowded around the fight were between him and the door.

He did see the victor toss his shoe into the air however, with a final shout of "Fucker!"

The shoe.

Steve couldn't take his eyes off the shoe. It rose in the air, turning as it rose, then plummeted to the bare boards like a shot bird. Steve saw it clearly, more clearly than he'd seen anything in many days.

It landed not far from him.

It landed with a loud thud.

It landed on its side. As his shoe had landed. His shoe. The one he kicked off. On the grid. In the room. In the house. In Pilgrim Street.

Quaid woke with the same dream. Always the stairway. Always him looking down the tunnel of the stairs, while that ridiculous sight, half-joke, half-horror, tip-toed up towards him, a laugh on every step.

He'd never dreamt twice in one night before. He swung his hand out over the edge of the bed and fumbled for the bottle he kept there. In the dark he swigged from it, deeply.

Steve walked past the knot of angry men, not caring about their shouts or the old man's groans and curses. The warders were having a hard time dealing with the disturbance. It was the last time Old Man Crowley would be let in: he always invited violence. This had all the marks of a near-riot; it would take hours to settle them down again. Nobody questioned Steve as he wandered down the corridor, through the gate, and into the vestibule of the Night Hostel. The swing doors were closed, but the night air, bitter before dawn, smelt refreshing as it seeped in. The pokey reception office was empty, and through the door Steve could see the fire-extinguisher hanging on the wall. It was red and bright: Beside it was a long black hose, curled up on a red drum like a sleeping snake. Beside that, sitting in two brackets on the wall, was an axe. Quaid woke again.

A very pretty axe.

Stephen walked into the office. A little distance away he heard running feet, shouts, a whistle. But nobody came to interrupt Steve, as he made friends with the axe.

First he smiled at it.

The curve of the blade of the axe smiled back.

Then he touched it.

The axe seemed to like being touched. It was dusty, and hadn't been used in a long while. Too long. It wanted to be picked up, and stroked, and smiled at. Steve took it out of its brackets very gently, and slid it under his jacket to keep warm. Then he walked back out of the reception office, through the swing-doors and out to find his other shoe.

It took Steve a very short time to orient himself. There was a spring in his step as he began to make his way to Pilgrim Street. He felt like a

clown, dressed in so many bright colours, in such floppy trousers, such silly boots. He was a comical fellow, wasn't he? He made himself laugh, he was so comical.

The wind began to get into him, whipping him up into a frenzy as it scooted through his hair and made his eye-balls as cold as two lumps of ice in his sockets.

He began to run, skip, dance, cavort through the streets, white under the lights, dark in between. Now you see me, now you don't. Now you see me, now you -Quaid hadn't been woken by the dream this time. This time he had heard a noise. Definitely a noise.

The moon had risen high enough to throw its beams through the window, through the door and on to the top of the stairs. There was no need to put on the light. All he needed to see, he could see. The top of the stairs were empty, as ever.

Then the bottom stair creaked, a tiny noise as though a breath had landed on it.

Quaid knew dread then.

Another creak, as it came up the stairs towards him, the ridiculous dream. It had to be a dream. After all, he knew no clowns, no axe-killers. So how could that absurd image, the same image that woke him night after night, be anything but a dream?

Yet, perhaps there were some dreams so preposterous they could only be true.

No clowns, he said to himself, as he stood watching the door, and the stairway, and the spotlight of the moon. Quaid knew only fragile minds, so weak they couldn't give him a clue to the nature, to the origin, or to the cure for the panic that now held him in thrall. All they did was break, crumble into dust, when faced with the slightest sign of the dread at the heart of life.

He knew no clowns, never had, never would.

Then it appeared; the face of a fool. Pale to whiteness in the light of the moon, its young features bruised, unshaven and puffy, its smile open like a child's smile. It had bitten its lip in its excitement. Blood was smeared across its lower jaw, and its gums were almost black with blood. Still it was a clown. Indisputably a clown even to its ill-fitting clothes, so incongruous, so pathetic.

Only the axe didn't quite match the smile.

It caught the moonlight as the maniac made small, chopping motions with it, his tiny black eyes glinting with anticipation of the fun ahead.

Almost at the top of the stairs, he stopped, his smile not faltering for a moment as he gazed at Quaid's terror. Quaid's legs gave out, and he stumbled to his knees.

The clown climbed another stair, skipping as he did so, his glittering eyes fixed on Quaid, filled with a sort of benign malice. The axe rocked back and forth in his white hands, in a petite version of the killing stroke. Quaid knew him.

It was his pupil: his guinea-pig, transformed into the image of his own dread.

Him. Of all men. Him. The deaf boy.

The skipping was bigger now, and the clown was making a deep-throated noise, like the call of some fantastical bird. The axe was describing wider and wider sweeps in the air, each more lethal than the last.

"Stephen," said Quaid.

The name meant nothing to Steve. All he saw was the mouth opening. The mouth closing. Perhaps a sound came out: perhaps not. It was irrelevant to him.

The throat of the clown gave out a screech, and the axe swung up over his head, two-handed. At the same moment the merry little dance became a run, as the axe man leapt the last two stairs and ran into the bedroom, full into the spotlight.

Quaid's body half turned to avoid the killing blow, but not quickly or elegantly enough. The blade slit the air and sliced through the back of Quaid's arm, sheering off most of his triceps, shattering his humerus and opening the flesh of his lower arm in a gash that just missed his artery.

Quaid's scream could have been heard ten houses away, except that those houses were rubble. There was nobody to hear. Nobody to come and drag the clown off him.

The axe, eager to be about its business, was hacking at Quaid's thigh now, as though it was chopping a log. Yawning wounds four or five inches deep exposed the shiny steak of the philosopher's muscle, the bone, the marrow. With each stroke the clown would tug at the axe to pull it out, and Quaid's body would jerk like a puppet. Quaid screamed. Quaid begged. Quaid cajoled.

The clown didn't hear a word.

All he heard was the noise in his head: the whistles, the whoops, the howls, the hums. He had taken refuge where no rational argument, nor threat, would ever fetch him out again. Where the thump of his heart was law, and the whine of his blood was music.

How he danced, this deaf-boy, danced like a loon to see his tormentor gaping like a fish, the depravity of his intellect silenced forever. How the blood spurted! How it gushed and fountained!

The little clown laughed to see such fun. There was a night's entertainment to be had here, he thought. The axe was his friend forever, keen and wise. It could cut, and cross-cut, it could slice and amputate, yet still they could keep this man alive, if they were cunning enough, alive for a long, long while.

Steve was happy as a lamb. They had the rest of the night ahead of them, and all the music he could possibly want was sounding in his head.

And Quaid knew, meeting the clown's vacant stare through an air turned bloody, that there was worse in the world than dread. Worse than death itself.

There was pain without hope of healing. There was life that refused to end, long after the mind had begged the body to cease. And worst, there were dreams come true.

VIII: HELL'S EVENT

Hell came up to the streets and squares of London that September, icy from the depths of the Ninth Circle, too frozen to be warmed even by the swelter of an Indian summer. It had laid its plans as carefully as ever, plans being what they were, and fragile. This time it was perhaps a little more finicky than usual, checking every last detail twice or three times, to be certain it had every chance of winning this vital game.

It had never lacked competitive spirit; it had matched life against flesh a thousand times down the centuries, sometimes winning, more often losing. Wagers were, after all, the stuff of its advancement. Without the human urge to compete, to bargain, and to bet, Pandemonium might well have fallen for want of citizens. Dancing, dog racing, fiddle-playing: it was all one to the gulfs; all a game in which it might, if it played with sufficient wit, garner a soul or two. That was why Hell came up to London that bright blue day: to run a race, and to win, if it could, enough souls to keep it busy with perdition another age.

Cameron tuned his radio; the voice of the commentator flared and faded as though he was speaking from the Pole instead of St Paul's Cathedral. It was still a good half-hour before the race began, but Cameron wanted to listen to the warm-up commentary, just to hear what they were saying about his boy.

"… atmosphere is electric… probably tens of thousands along the route…"

The voice disappeared: Cameron cursed, and toyed with the dial until the imbecilities reappeared."…been called the race of the year, and what a day it is! Isn't it, Jim?"

"It certainly is, Mike -”

"That's big Jim Delaney, who's up there in the Eye in the Sky, and he'll be following the race along the route, giving us a bird's eye view, won't you, Jim?"

"I certainly will, Mike -”

"Well, there's a lot of activity behind the line, the competitors are all loosening up for the start. I can see Nick Loyer there, he's wearing

number three, and I must say he's looking very fit. H e said to m e when he arrived he didn't usually like to run on Sundays, but he's made an exception for this race, because of course it's a charity event, and all the proceeds will be going to Cancer Research. Joel Jones, our Gold Medalist in the 800 metres is here, and he'll be running against his great rival Frank McCloud. And besides the big boys we've got a smattering of new faces. Wearing number five, the South African, Malcolm Voight, and completing the field Lester Kinderman, who was of course the surprise winner of the marathon in Austria last year. And I must say they all look fresh as daisies on this superb September afternoon. Couldn't ask for a better day, could we Jim?"

Joel had woken with bad dreams.

"You'll be fine, stop fretting," Cameron had told him.

But he didn't feel fine; he felt sick in the pit of his stomach. Not pre-race nerves; he was used to those, and he could deal with the feeling. Two fingers down the Throat and throw up, that was the best remedy he'd found; get it over and done with. No, this wasn't pre-race nerves, or anything like them. It was deeper, for a start, as though his bowels, to his centre, to his source, were cooking.

Cameron had no sympathy.

"It's a charity race, not the Olympics," he said, looking the boy over. "Act your age."

That was Cameron's technique. His mellow voice was made for coaxing, but was used to bully. Without that bullying there would have been no gold medal, no cheering crowds, no admiring girls. One of the tabloids had voted Joel the best loved black face in England. It was good to be greeted as a friend by people he'd never met; he liked the admiration, however short-lived it might turn out to be.

"They love you," said Cameron. "God knows why – they love you."

Then he laughed, his little cruelty over.

"You'll be all right, son," he said. "Get out and run for your life."

Now, in the broad daylight, Joel looked at the rest of the field and felt a little more buoyant. Kinderman had stamina, but he had no finishing power over middle distance. Marathon technique was a different skill altogether. Besides he was so short-sighted he wore wire rimmed glasses so thick they gave him the look of a bemused frog. No

danger there. Loyer; he was good, but this wasn't really his distance either. He was a hurdler, and a sometime sprinter. 400 metres was his limit and even then he wasn't happy. Voight, the South African. Well, there was not much information on him. Obviously a fit man to judge by the look of him, and someone to watch out for just in case he sprung a surprise. But the real problem of the race was McCloud. Joel had run against Frank "Flash' McCloud three times. Twice beaten him into second place, once (painfully) had the positions reversed. And Frankie boy had a few scores to settle: especially the Olympics defeat; he hadn't liked taking the silver. Frank was the man to watch. Charity race or no charity race McCloud would be running his best, for the crowd and for his pride. He was at the line already testing his starting position, his ears practically pricked. Flash was the man, no doubt of it.

For a moment Joel caught Voight staring at him. Unusual that. Competitors seldom even glanced at each other before a race, it was a kind of coyness. The man's face was pale, and his hair-line was receding. He looked to be in his early thirties, but had a younger, leaner physique. Long legs, big hands. A body somehow out of proportion to his head. When their eyes met, Voight looked away. The fine chain around his neck caught the sun and the crucifix he was wearing glinted gold as it swung gently beneath his chin.

Joel had his good-luck charm with him too. Tucked into the waistband of his shorts, a lock of his mother's hair, which she had plaited for him half a decade ago, before his first major race. She had returned to Barbados the following year, and died there. A great grief: an unforgettable loss. Without Cameron, he would have crumbled. Cameron watched the preparations from the steps of the Cathedral; he planned to see the start, then ride his bike round the back of the Strand to catch the finish. He'd arrive well before the competitors, and he could keep up with the race on his radio. He felt good with the day. His boy was in fine shape, nausea or no nausea, and the race was an ideal way to keep the lad in a competitive mood without over-stretching him. It was quite a distance of course, across Ludgate Circus, along Fleet Street and past Temple Bar into the Strand, then cutting across the corner of Trafalgar and down Whitehall to the Houses of Parliament. Running on tarmac too. But it was good experience for Joel, and it would pressure him a little, which was useful. There was a distance runner in the boy, and Cameron knew it. He'd never been a sprinter, he couldn't pace himself accurately enough. He needed distance and time, to find his pulse, to settle down and to work out his tactics. Over 800 metres the boy was a natural: his stride was a model of economy, his rhythm damn-near perfect. But

more, he had courage. Courage had won him the gold, and courage would take him first to the finish again and again. That's what made Joel different. Any number of technical whizzkids came and went, but without courage to supplement those skills they went for almost nothing. To risk when it was worth risking, to run 'til the pain blinded you, that was special and Cameron knew it. He liked to think he'd had a little of it himself.

Today, the boy looked less than happy. W omen trouble was Cameron's bet. There were always problems with women, especially with the golden boy reputation Joel had garnered. He'd tried to explain that there'd be plenty of time for bed and bawd when his career had run out of steam, but Joel wasn't interested in celibacy, and Cameron didn't altogether blame him.

The pistol was raised, and fired. A plume of blue-white smoke followed by a sound more pop than bang. The shot woke the pigeons from the dome of St Paul's and they rose in a chattering congregation, their worship interrupted. Joel was off to a good start. Clean, neat and fast.

The crowd began to call his name immediately, their voices at his back, at his side, a gale of loving enthusiasm. Cameron watched the first two dozen yards, as the field jockeyed for a running order. Loyer was at the front of the pack, though Cameron wasn't sure whether he'd got there by choice or chance. Joel was behind McCloud, who was behind Loyer. No hurry, boy, said Cameron, and slipped away from the starting line. His bicycle was chained up in Paternoster Row, a minute's walk from the square. He'd always hated cars: godless things, crippling, inhuman, unchristian things. With a bike you were your own master. Wasn't that all a man could ask?

"- And it's a superb start here, to what looks like a potentially marvelous race. They're already across the square and the crowd's going wild here: it really is more like the European Games than a Charity Race. What does it look like to you, Jim?"

"Well Mike, I can see crowds lining the route all the way along Fleet Street: and I've been asked by the police to tell people please not to try and drive down to see the race, because of course all these roads have been cleared for the event, and if you try and drive, really you'll get nowhere."

"Who's got the lead at the moment?"

"Well, Nick Loyer is really setting the pace at this stage in the game, though of course as we know there's going to be a lot of tactical running over this kind of distance. It's more than a middle-distance, and it's less than a marathon, but these men are all tacticians, and they'll each be trying to let the other make the running in the early stages." Cameron always said: let the others be heroes.

That was a hard lesson to learn, Joel had found. When the pistol was fired it was difficult not to go for broke, unwind suddenly like a tight spring. All gone in the first two hundred yards and nothing left in reserve. It's easy to be a hero, Cameron used to say. It's not clever, it's not clever at all. Don't waste your time showing off, just let the Supermen have their moment. Hang on to the pack, but hold back a little. Better to be cheered at the post because you won than have them call you a good-hearted loser.

Win. Win. Win.

At all costs. At almost all costs.

Win.

The man who doesn't want to win is no friend of mine, he'd say. If you want to do it for the love of it, for the sport of it, do it with somebody else. Only public schoolboys believe that crap about the joy of playing the game. There's no joy for losers, boy. What did I say?

There's no joy for losers.

Be barbaric. Play the rules, but play them to the limit. As far as you can push, push. Let no other sonofabitch tell you differently. You're here to win. What did I say?

Win.

In Paternoster Row the cheering was muted, and the shadows of the buildings blocked the sun. It was almost cold. The pigeons still passed over, unable to settle now they'd been roused from their roost. They were the only occupants of the back streets. The rest of the living world, it seemed, was watching this race.

Cameron unlocked his bicycle, pocketed the chain and pad-locks, and hopped on. Pretty healthy for a fifty year old he thought, despite the addiction to cheap cigars. He switched on the radio. Reception was bad, walled in by the buildings; all crackle. He stood astride his bike and tried to improve the tuning. It did a little good."- and Nick

Loyer is falling behind already -"

That was quick. Mind you, Loyer was past his prime by two or three years. Time to throw in the spikes and let the younger men take over. He'd had to do it, though my God it had been painful. Cameron remembered acutely how he'd felt at thirty-three, when he realized that his best running years were over. It was like having one foot buried in the grave, a salutary reminder of how quickly the body blooms and begins to wither.

As he pedaled out of the shadows into a sunnier street a black Mercedes, chauffeur-driven, sailed past, so quietly it could have been wind-propelled. Cameron caught sight of the passengers only briefly. One he recognized as a man Voight had been talking with before the race, a thin faced individual of about forty, with a mouth so tight his lips might have been surgically removed.

Beside him sat Voight.

Impossible as it seemed it was Voight's face that glanced back out of the smoked glass windows; he was even dressed for the race.

Cameron didn't like the look of this at all. He'd seen the South African five minutes earlier, off and running. So who was this? A double obviously. It smelt of a fix, somehow; it stank to high heaven.

The Mercedes was already disappearing around a corner. Cameron turned off the radio and pedaled pell-mell after the car. The balmy sun made him sweat as he rode.

The Mercedes was threading its way through the narrow streets with some difficulty, ignoring all the One Way signs as it went. Its slow passage made it relatively easy for Cameron to keep the vehicle in view without being seen by its occupants, though the effort was beginning to light a fire in his lungs.

In a tiny, nameless alley just west of Fetter Lane, where the shadows were particularly dense, the Mercedes stopped. Cameron, hidden from view round a corner not twenty yards from the car, watched as the door was opened by the chauffeur and the lipless man, with the Voight look-alike close behind, stepped out and went into a nondescript building. When all three had disappeared Cameron propped his bike up against the wall and followed. The street was pin-drop hushed. From this distance the roar of the crowd was only a murmur. It could have been another world, this street. The flitting shadows of birds, the windows of the buildings bricked up, the peeling

paint, the rotten smell in the still air. A dead rabbit lay in the gutter, a black rabbit with a white collar, someone's lost pet. Flies rose and fell on it, alternately startled and ravenous.

Cameron crept towards the open door as quietly as he was able. He had, as it turned out, nothing to fear. The trio had disappeared down the dark hallway of the house long since. The air was cool in the hall, and smelt of damp. Looking fearless, but feeling afraid, Cameron entered the blind building. The wall-paper in the hallway was shit-coloured, the paint the same. It was like walking into a bowel; a dead man's bowel, cold and shitty. Ahead, the stairway had collapsed, preventing access to the upper storey. They had not gone up, but down.

The door to the cellar was adjacent to the defunct staircase, and Cameron could hear voices from below. No time like the present, he thought, and opened the door sufficiently to squeeze into the dark beyond. It was icy. Not just cold, not damp, but refrigerated. For a moment he thought he'd stepped into a cold storage room. His breath became a mist at his lips: his teeth wanted to chatter.

Can't turn back now, he thought, and started down the frost-slick steps. It wasn't impossibly dark. At the bottom of the flight, a long way down, a pale light flickered, its uninspired glow aspiring to the day. Cameron glanced longingly round at the open door behind him. It looked extremely tempting, but he was curious, so curious. There was nothing to do but descend.

In his nostrils the scent of the place teased. He had a lousy sense of smell, and a worse palate, as his wife was fond of reminding him. She'd say he couldn't distinguish between garlic and a rose, and it was probably true. But the smell in this deep meant something to him, something that stirred the acid in his belly into life. Goats. It smelt, ha, he wanted to tell her then and there how he'd remembered, it smelt of goats. He was almost at the bottom of the stairs, twenty, maybe thirty, feet underground. The voices were still some distance away, behind a second door.

He was standing in a little chamber, its walls badly white-washed and scrawled with obscene graffiti, mostly pictures of the sex-act. On the floor, a candelabra, seven forked. Only two of the dingy candles were lit, and they burned with a guttering flame that was almost blue. The goaty smell was stronger now: and mingled with a scent so sickly-sweet it belonged in a Turkish brothel.

Two doors led off the chamber, and from behind one Cameron heard the conversation continuing. With scrupulous caution he crossed the slippery floor to the door, straining to make sense of the murmuring voices. There was an urgency in them.

"- hurry -"

"- the right skills -"'children, children -"Laughter.

"I believe we – tomorrow – all of us -"

Laughter again.

Suddenly the voices seemed to change direction, as if the speakers were moving back towards the door. Cameron took three steps back across the icy floor, almost colliding with the candelabra. The flames spat and whispered in the chamber as he passed.

He had to choose either the stairs or the other door. The stairs represented utter retreat. If he climbed them he'd be safe, but he would never know. Never know why the cold, why the blue flames, why the smell of goats. The door was a chance. Back to it, his eyes on the door opposite, he fought with the bitingly cold brass handle. It turned with some tussling, and he ducked out of sight as the door opposite opened. The two movements were perfectly syncopated: God was with him.

Even as he closed the door he knew he'd made an error. God wasn't with him at all.

Needles of cold penetrated his head, his teeth, his eyes, his fingers. He felt as though he'd been thrown naked into the heart of an iceberg. His blood seemed to stand still in his veins: the spit on his tongue crystallized: the mucus on the lining of his nose pricked as it turned to ice. The cold seemed to cripple him: he couldn't even turn round.

Barely able to move his joints, he fumbled for his cigarette lighter with fingers so numb they could have been cut off without him feeling it.

The lighter was already glued to his hand, the sweat on his fingers had turned to frost. He tried to ignite it, against the dark, against the cold. Reluctantly it sparked into a spluttering half-life.

The room was large: an ice-cavern. Its walls, its encrusted roof, sparkled and shone. Stalactites of ice, lance-sharp, hung over his head.

The floor on which he stood, poised uncertainly, was raked towards a hole in the middle of the room. Five or six feet across, its edges and walls were so lined with ice it seemed as though a river had been arrested as it poured down into the darkness.

He thought of Xanadu, a poem he knew by heart.

Visions of another Albion -”Where Alph the sacred river ran, through caverns measureless to man, Down to a sunless sea."

If there was indeed a sea down there, it was a frozen sea. It was death forever.

It was as much as he could do to keep upright, to prevent himself from sliding down the incline towards the unknown. The lighter flickered as an icy air blew it out.

"Shit," said Cameron as he was plunged into darkness. Whether the word alerted the trio outside, or whether God deserted him totally at that moment and invited them to open the door, he would never know. But as the door swung wide it pushed Cameron off his feet. Too numb and too frozen to prevent his fall he collapsed to the ice floor as the smell of the goat wafted into the room.

Cameron half turned. Voight's double was at the door, as was the chauffeur, and the third man in the Mercedes. He wore a coat apparently made of several goat-skins. The hooves and the horns still hung from it. The blood on its fur was brown and gummy.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Cameron?" asked the goat-coated man.

Cameron could barely speak. The only feeling left in his head was a pin-point of agony in the middle of his forehead.

"What the hell is going on?" he said, through lips almost too frozen to move.

"Precisely that, Mr. Cameron," the man replied. "H ell is going on."

As they ran past St Mary-le-Strand, Loyer glanced behind him, and stumbled. Joel, a full three metres behind the leaders, knew the man was giving up. So quickly too; there was something amiss. He slackened his pace, letting McCloud and Voight pass him. No great hurry. Kinderman was quite a way behind, unable to compete with these fast boys. He was the tortoise in this race, for sure. Loyer was

overtaken by McCloud, then Voight, and finally Jones and Kinderman. His breath had suddenly deserted him, and his legs felt like lead. Worse, he was seeing the tarmac under his running shoes creaking and cracking, and fingers, like loveless children, seeking up out of the ground to touch him. Nobody else was seeing them, it seemed. The crowds just roared on, while these illusory hands broke out of their tarmac graves and secured a hold on him. He collapsed into their dead arms exhausted, his youth broken and his strength spent. The enquiring fingers of the dead continued to pluck at him, long after the doctors had removed him from the track, examined him and sedated him.

He knew why, of course, lying there on the hot tarmac while they had their pricking way with him. He'd looked behind him. That's what had made them come. He'd looked -”And after Loyer's sensational collapse, the race is open wide. Frank the Flash McCloud is setting the pace now, and he's really speeding away from the new boy, Voight. Joel Jones is even further behind, he doesn't seem to be keeping up with the leaders at all. What do you think, Jim?" "Well he's either pooped already, or he's really taking a chance that they'll exhaust themselves. Remember he's new over this distance -”

"Yes, Jim -”

"And that might make him careless. Certainly he's going to have to do a lot of work to improve on his present position in third place."

Joel felt giddy. For a moment, as he'd watched Loyer begin to lose his grip on the race, he'd heard the man praying out loud. Praying to God to save him. He'd been the only one who heard the words -”Yea, though I walk through the shadows of the Valley of Death I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they -”

The sun was hotter now, and Joel was beginning to feel the familiar voices of his tiring limbs. Running on tarmac was hard on the feet, hard on the joints. Not that that would make a man take to praying. He tried to put Loyer's desperation out of his mind, and concentrate on the matter in hand.

There was still a lot of running to do, the race was not even half over. Plenty of time to catch up with the heroes: plenty of time.

As he ran, his brain idly turned over the prayers his mother had taught him in case he should need one, but the years had eroded them: they were all but gone.

"My name," said the goat-coated man, “is Gregory Burgess. Member of Parliament. You wouldn't know me. I try to keep a low profile." "Lo! Dis; and lo! the place” "MP?" said Cameron.

"Yes. Independent. Very independent."

"Is that Voight's brother?"

Burgess glanced at Voight's other self. He was not even shivering in the intense cold, despite the fact that he was only wearing a thin singlet and shorts.

"Brother?" Burgess said. "No, no. He is my – what is the word? Familiar."

The word rang a bell, but Cameron wasn't well-read. What was a familiar?

"Show him," said Burgess magnanimously. Voight's face shook, the skin seeming to shrivel, the lips curling back from the teeth, the teeth melting into a white wax that poured down a gullet that was itself transfiguring into a column of shimmering silver. The face was no longer human, no longer even mammalian. It had become a fan of knives, their blades glistening in the candlelight through the door. Even as this bizarrerie became fixed, it started to change again, the knives melting and darkening, fur sprouting, eyes appearing and swelling to balloon size. Antennae leapt from this new head, mandibles were extruded from the pulp of transfiguration, and the head of a bee, huge and perfectly intricate, now sat on Voight's neck.

Burgess obviously enjoyed the display; he applauded with gloved hands.

"Familiars both," he said, gesturing to the chauffeur, who had removed the cap, and let a welter of auburn hair fall to her shoulders. She was ravishingly beautiful, a face to give your life for. But an illusion, like the other. No doubt capable of infinite personae.

"They're both mine, of course," said Burgess proudly.

"What?" was all Cameron could manage; he hoped it stood for all the questions in his head.

"I serve Hell, Mr. Cameron. And in its turn Hell serves me."

"Hell?"

"Behind you, one of the entrances to the Ninth Circle. You know your Dante, I presume?"

"Where thou hast need to arm thy heart with strength."

"Why are you here?"

"To run this race. Or rather my third familiar is already running the race. He will not be beaten this time. This time it is Hell's event, Mr. Cameron, and we shall not be cheated of the prize."

"Hell," said Cameron again.

"You believe don't you? You're a good church-goer. Still pray before you eat, like any God-fearing soul. Afraid of choking on your dinner."

"How do you know I pray?"

"Your wife told me. Oh, your wife was very informative about you, Mr. Cameron, she really opened up to me. Very accommodating. A confirmed analyst, after my attentions. She gave me so much… information. You're a good Socialist, aren't you, like your father."

"Politics now -"

"Oh, politics is the hub of the issue, Mr. Cameron. Without politics we're lost in a wilderness, aren't we? Even Hell needs order. Nine great circles: a pecking order of punishments. Look down; see for yourself." Cameron could feel the hole at his back: he didn't need to look.

"We stand for order, you know. Not chaos. That's just heavenly propaganda. And you know what we'll win?" "It's a charity race."

"Charity is the least of it. We're not running this race to save the world from cancer. We're running it for government."

Cameron half-grasped the point.

"Government," he said.

"Once every century this race is run from St Paul's to the Palace of Westminster. Often it has been run at the dead of night, unheralded, unapplauded. Today it is run in full sunshine, watched by thousands. But whatever the circumstance, it is always the same race. Your athletes, against one of ours. If you win, another hundred years of democracy. If we win… as we will… the end of the world as you

know it."

At his back Cameron felt a vibration. The expression on Burgess' face had abruptly changed; the confidence had become clouded, the smugness was instantly replaced by a look of nervous excitement.

"Well, well," he said, his hands flapping like birds. "It seems we are about to be visited by higher powers. How flattering -"

Cameron turned, and peered over the edge of the hole. It didn't matter how curious he was now. They had him; he may as well see all there was to see.

A wave of icy air blew up from the sunless circle and in the darkness of the shaft he could see a shape approaching. Its movement was steady, and its face was thrown back to look at the world.

Cameron could hear its breathing, see the wound of its features open and close in the murk, oily bone locking and unlocking like the face of a crab.

Burgess was on his knees, the two familiars flat on the floor to either side of him, faces to the ground. Cameron knew he would have no other chance. He stood up, his limbs hardly in his control, and blundered towards Burgess, whose eyes were closed in reverent prayer. More by accident than intention his knee caught Burgess under the jaw as he passed, and the man was sent sprawling. Cameron's soles slid on the floor out of the ice-cavern and into the candlelit chamber beyond.

Behind him, the room was filling with smoke and sighs, and Cameron, like Lot's wife fleeing from the destruction of Sodom, glanced back just once to see the forbidden sight behind him.

It was emerging from the shaft, its grey bulk filling the hole, lit by some radiance from below. Its eyes, deep-set in the naked bone of its elephantine head, met Cameron's through the open door. They seemed to touch him like a kiss, entering his thoughts through his eyes.

He was not turned to salt. Pulling his curious glance away from the face, he skated across the ante-chamber and started to climb the stairs two and three at a time, falling and climbing, falling and climbing. The door was still ajar. Beyond it, daylight and the world.

He flung the door open and collapsed into the hallway, feeling the warmth already beginning to wake his frozen nerves. There was no

noise on the stairs behind him: clearly they were too in awe of their fleshless visitor to follow him. He hauled himself along the wall of the hallway, his body wracked with shivers and chatterings. Still they didn't follow.

Outside the day was blindingly bright, and he began to feel the exhilaration of escape. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before. To have been so close, yet survived. God had been with him after all.

He staggered along the road back to his bicycle, determined to stop the race, to tell the world -His bike was untouched, its handlebars warm as his wife's arms.

As he hooked his leg over, the look he had exchanged with Hell caught fire. His body, ignorant of the heat in his brain, continued about its business for a moment, putting its feet on the pedals and starting to ride away. Cameron felt the ignition in his head and knew he was dead.

The look, the glance behind him -Lot's wife.

Like Lot's stupid wife -The lightning leapt between his ears: faster than thought.

His skull cracked, and the lightning, white-hot, shot out from the furnace of his brain. His eyes withered to black nuts in his sockets, he belched light from mouth and nostrils. The combustion turned him into a column of black flesh in a matter of seconds, without a flame or a wisp of smoke.

Cameron's body was completely incinerated by the time the bicycle careered off the road and crashed through the tailor's shop window, where it lay like a dummy, face down amongst the ashen suits. He, too, had looked back.

The crowds at Trafalgar Square were a seething mass of enthusiasm. Cheers, tears and flags. It was as though this little race had become something special for these people: a ritual the significance of which they could not know. Yet somewhere in them they understood the day was laden with sulphur, they sensed their lives stood on tiptoe to reach heaven. Especially the children. They ran along the route, shouting incoherent blessings, their faces squeezed up with their fears. Some called his name. "Joel! Joel!"

Or did he imagine that? Had he imagined, too, the prayer from Loyer's lips, and the signs in the radiant faces of the babies held high

to watch the runners pass?

As they turned into Whitehall Frank McCloud glanced confidentially over his shoulder and Hell took him. It was sudden: it was simple.

He stumbled, an icy hand in his chest crushing the life out of him. Joel slowed as he approached the man. His face was purple: his lips foamy.

"McCloud," he said, and stopped to stare in his great rival's thin face.

McCloud looked up at him from behind a veil of smoke that had turned his grey eyes ochre. Joel reached down to help him.

"Don't touch me," McCloud growled. The filament vessels in his eyes bulged and bled.

"Cramp?" asked Joel. "Is it cramp?"

"Run, you bastard, run," McCloud was saying at him, as the hand in his innards seized his life out. He was oozing blood through the pores on his face now, weeping red tears. "Run. And don't look back. For Christ's sake, don't look back."

"What is it?"

"Run for your life!"

The words weren't requests but imperatives.

Run.

Not for gold or glory. Just to live.

Joel glanced up, suddenly aware that there was some huge-headed thing at his back, cold breath on his neck. He picked up his heels and ran.

"- Well, things aren't going so well for the runners here, Jim. After Loyer going down so sensationally, now Frank McCloud has stumbled too. I've never seen anything quite like it. But he seems to have had a few words with Joel Jones as he ran past, so he must be OK."

McCloud was dead by the time they put him in the ambulance, and putrefied by the following morning. Joel ran. Jesus, did he run. The sun had become ferocious in his face, washing the colour out of the

cheering crowds, out of the faces, out of the flags. Everything was one sheet of noise, drained of humanity.

Joel knew the feeling that was coming over him, the sense of dislocation that accompanied fatigue and over oxygenation. He was running in a bubble of his own consciousness, thinking, sweating, suffering by himself, for himself, in the name of himself.

And it wasn't so bad, this being alone. Songs began to fill his head: snatches of hymns, sweet phrases from love songs, dirty rhymes. His self idled, and his dream-mind, unnamed and fearless, took over.

Ahead, washed by the same white rain of light, was Voight. That was the enemy, that was the thing to be surpassed. Voight, with his shining crucifix rocking in the sun. He could do it, as long as he didn't look, as long as he didn't look -Behind him.

Burgess opened the door of the Mercedes and climbed in. Time had been wasted: valuable time. He should be at the Houses of Parliament, at the finishing line, ready to welcome the runners home. There was a scene to play, in which he would pretend the mild and smiling face of democracy. And tomorrow? Not so mild.

His hands were clammy with excitement, and his pinstripe suit smelt of the goat-skin coat he was obliged to wear in the room. Still, nobody would notice; and even if they did what English-man would be so impolite to mention that he smelt goaty?

He hated the Lower Chamber, the perpetual ice, that damn yawning hole with its distant sound of loss. But all that was over now. He'd made his oblations, he'd shown his utter and ceaseless adoration of the pit; now it was time to reap the rewards.

As they drove, he thought of his many sacrifices to ambition. At first, minor stuff: kittens and cockerels. Later, he was to discover how ridiculous they thought such gestures were. But at the beginning he'd been innocent: not knowing what to give or how to give it. They began to make their requirements clear as the years went by, and he, in time, learnt to practice the etiquette of selling his soul. His self mortifications were studiously planned and immaculately staged, though they had left him without nipples or the hope of children. It was worth the pain, though: the power came to him by degrees. A triple first at Oxford, a wife endowed beyond the dreams of priapism, a seat in Parliament, and soon, soon enough, the country itself.

The cauterized stumps of his thumbs ached, as they often did when

he was nervous. Idly, he sucked on one.

"- Well we're now in the closing stages of what really has been one hell of a race, eh, Jim?"

"Oh yes, it's really been a revelation, hasn't it? Voight is really the outsider of the field; and here he is streaking away from the competition without much effort. Of course, Jones made the unselfish gesture of checking with Frank McCloud that he was indeed all right after that bad fall of his, and that put him behind."

"It's lost the race for Jones really, hasn't it?"

"I think that's right. I think it lost the race for him."

"This is a charity race, of course."

"Absolutely. And in a situation like this it's not whether you win or lose -"

"It's how you play the game."

"Right."

"Right."

"Well they're both in sight of the Houses of Parliament now as they come round the bend of Whitehall. And the crowds are cheering their boy on, but I really think it's a lost cause -"

"Mind you, he brought something special out of the bag in Sweden."

"He did. He did."

"Maybe he'll do it again."

Joel ran, and the gap between himself and Voight was beginning to close. He concentrated on the man's back, his eyes boring into his shirt, learning his rhythm, looking for weaknesses.

There was a slowing there. The man was not as fast as he had been. An unevenness had crept into his stride, a sure sign of fatigue.

He could take him. With courage, he could take him.

And Kinderman. He'd forgotten about Kinderman. Without thinking, Joel glanced over his shoulder and looked behind him.

Kinderman was way back, still keeping his steady marathon runner's pace unchanged. But there was something else behind Joel: another runner, almost on his heels; ghostly, vast.

He averted his eyes and stared ahead, cursing his stupidity.

He was gaining on Voight with every pace. The man was really running out of steam, quite clearly. Joel knew he could take him for certain, if he worked at it. Forget his pursuer, whatever it was, forget everything except overtaking Voight.

But the sight at his back wouldn't leave his head.

"Don't look back': McCloud's words. Too late, he'd done it. Better to know then who this phantom was. He looked again.

At first he saw nothing, just Kinderman jogging along. And then the ghost runner appeared once more and he knew what had brought McCloud and Loyer down.

It was no runner, living or dead. It wasn't even human. A smoky body, and yawning darkness for its head, it was Hell itself that was pressing on him.

"Don't look back."

Its mouth, if mouth it was, was open. Breath so cold it made Joel gasp swirled around him. That was why Loyer had muttered prayers as he ran. Much good it had done him; death had come anyway.

Joel looked away, not caring to see Hell so close, trying to ignore the sudden weakness in his knees. Now Voight, too, was glancing behind him. The look on his face was dark and uneasy: and Joel knew somehow that he belonged to Hell, that the shadow behind him was Voight's master.

"Voight. Voight. Voight. Voight-" Joel expelled the word with every stride.

Voight heard his name being spoken.

"Black bastard," he said aloud.

Joel's stride lengthened a little. He was within two metres of Hell's runner.

"Look… Behind… You," said Voight.

"I see it."

"It's… come… for… you."

The words were mere melodrama: two-dimensional. He was master of his body wasn't he? And he was not afraid of darkness, he was painted in it. Wasn't that what made him less than human as far as so many people were concerned? Or more, more than human; bloodier, sweatier, fleshier. More arm, more leg, more head. More strength, more appetite. What could Hell do? Eat him? He'd taste foul on the palate. Freeze him? He was too hot-blooded, too fast, too living.

Nothing would take him, he was a barbarian with the manners of a gentleman.

Neither night nor day entirely.

Voight was suffering: his pain was in his torn breath, in the gangling rags of his stride. They were just fifty metres from the steps and the finishing line, but Voight's lead was being steadily eroded; each step brought the runners closer.

Then the bargains began.

"Listen. – to… me."

"What are you?"

"Power… I'll get you power… just… let… us win."

Joel was almost at his side now.

"Too late."

His legs elated: his mind spun with pleasure. Hell behind him: Hell beside him, what did he care? He could run. He passed Voight, joints fluent: an easy machine.

"Bastard. Bastard. Bastard -" the familiar was saying, his face contorted with the agonies of stress. And didn't that face flicker as Joel passed it by? Didn't its features seem to lose, momentarily, the illusion of being human? Then Voight was falling behind him, and the crowds were cheering, and the colours were flooding back into the world. It was victory ahead. He didn't know for what cause, but victory nevertheless.

There was Cameron, he saw him now, standing on the steps beside a

man Joel didn't know, a man in a pinstripe suit. Cameron was smiling and shouting with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, beckoning to Joel from the steps. He ran, if anything, a little faster towards the finishing line, his strength coaxed by Cameron's face. Then the face seemed to change. Was it the heat haze that made his hair shimmer? No, the flesh of his cheeks was bubbling now, and there were dark patches growing darker still on his neck, at his forehead. Now his hair was rising from his head and cremating light was flickering up from his scalp. Cameron was burning. Cameron was burning, and still the smile, and still the beckoning hand.

Joel felt sudden despair.

Hell behind. Hell in front.

This wasn't Cameron. Cameron was nowhere to be seen: so Cameron was gone.

He knew it in his gut. Cameron was gone: and this black parody that smiled at him and welcomed him was his last moments, replayed for the delight of his admirers.

Joel's step faltered, the rhythm of his stride lost. At his back he heard Voight's breath, horridly thick, close, closer. His whole body suddenly revolted. His stomach demanded to throw up its contents, his legs cried out to collapse, his head refused to think, only to fear.

"Run," he said to himself. "Run. Run. Run."

But hell was ahead. How could he run into the arms of such foulness?

Voight had closed the gap between them, and was at his shoulder, jostling him as he passed. The victory was being snatched from Joel easily: sweets from a babe.

The finishing line was a dozen strides away, and Voight had the lead again. Scarcely aware of what he was doing, Joel reached out and snatched at Voight as he ran, grabbing his singlet. It was a cheat, clear to everybody in the crowd. But what the Hell.

He pulled hard at Voight, and both men stumbled. The crowd parted as they veered off the track and fell heavily, Voight on top of Joel.

Joel's arm, flung out to prevent him falling too heavily, was crushed

under the weight of both bodies. Caught badly, the bone of his forearm cracked. Joel heard it snap a moment before he felt the spasm; then the pain threw a cry out of his mouth.

On the steps, Burgess was screeching like a wild man. Quite a performance. Cameras were snapping, commentators commenting.

"Get up! Get up!" the man was yelling.

But Joel had snatched Voight with his one good arm, and nothing was going to make him let go. The two rolled around in the gravel, every roll crushing Joel's arm and sending spurts of nausea through his gut. The familiar playing Voight was exhausted. It had never been so tired: unprepared for the stress of the race its master had demanded it run. Its temper was short, its control perilously close to snapping. Joel could smell its breath on his face, and it was the smell of a goat.

"Show yourself," he said.

The thing's eyes had lost their pupils: they were all white now. Joel hawked up a clot of phlegm from the back of his thick-spittled mouth and spat it in the familiar's face.

Its temper broke.

The face dissolved. What had seemed to be flesh sprouted into a new resemblance, a devouring trap without eyes or nose, or ears, or hair.

All around, the crowd shrank back. People shrieked: people fainted. Joel saw none of this: but heard the cries with satisfaction. This transformation was not just for his benefit: it was common knowledge. They were seeing it all, the truth, the filthy, gaping truth.

The mouth was huge, and lined with teeth like the maw of some deep-water fish, ridiculously large. Joel's one good arm was under its lower jaw, just managing to keep it at bay, as he cried for help.

Nobody stepped forward.

The crowd stood at a polite distance, still screaming, still staring, unwilling to interfere. It was purely a spectator sport, wrestling with the Devil. Nothing to do with them.

Joel felt the last of his strength falter: his arm could keep the mouth at bay no longer. Despairing, he felt the teeth at his brow and at his

chin, felt them pierce his flesh and his bone, felt, finally, the white night invade him, as the mouth bit off his face.

The familiar rose up from the corpse with strands of Joel's head hanging out from between its teeth. It had taken off the features like a mask, leaving a mess of blood and jerking muscle. In the open hole of Joel's mouth the root of his tongue flapped and spurted, past speaking sorrow.

Burgess didn't care how he appeared to the world. The race was everything: a victory was a victory however it was won. And Jones had cheated after all.

"Here!" he yelled to the familiar. "Heel!"

It turned its blood-strung face to him.

"Come here," Burgess ordered it.

They were only a few yards apart: a few strides to the line and the race was won.

"Run to me!" Burgess screeched. "Run! Run! Run!"

The familiar was weary, but it knew its master's voice. It loped towards the line, blindly following Burgess' calls. Four paces. Three – And Kinderman ran past it to the line. Short-sighted.

Kinderman, a pace ahead of Voight, took the race without knowing the victory he had won, without even seeing the horrors that were sprawled at his feet.

There were no cheers as he passed the line. No congratulations.

The air around the steps seemed to darken, and an unseasonal frost appeared in the air.

Shaking his head apologetically, Burgess fell to his knees. "Our Father, who wert in Heaven, unhallowed be thy name -"

Such an old trick. Such a naпve response.

The crowd began to back away. Some people were already running. Children, knowing the nature of the dark having been so recently touched by it, were the least troubled. They took their parents' hands and led them away from the spot like lambs, telling them not to look behind them, and their parents half-remembered the womb, the first

tunnel, the first aching exit from a hallowed place, the first terrible temptation to look behind and die. Remembering, they went with their children.

Only Kinderman seemed untouched. He sat on the steps and cleaned his glasses, smiling to have won, indifferent to the chill.

Burgess, knowing his prayers were insufficient, turned tail and disappeared into the Palace of Westminster. The familiar, deserted, relinquished all claim to human appearance and became itself. Insolid, insipid, it spat out the foul-tasting flesh of Joel Jones. Half chewed, the runner's face lay on the gravel beside his body. The familiar folded itself into the air and went back to the Circle it called home.

It was stale in the corridors of power: no life, no help.

Burgess was out of condition, and his running soon became a walk. A steady step along the gloom-panelled corridors, his feet almost silent on the well trodden carpet.

He didn't quite know what to do. Clearly he would be blamed for his failure to plan against all eventualities, but he was confident he could argue his way out of that. He would give them whatever they required as recompense for his lack of foresight. An ear, a foot; he had nothing to lose but flesh and blood.

But he had to plan his defence carefully, because they hated bad logic. It was more than his life was worth to come before them with half-formed excuses.

There was a chill behind him; he knew what it was. Hell had followed him along these silent corridors, even into the very womb of democracy. He would survive though, as long as he didn't turn round: as long as he kept his eyes on the floor, or on his thumbless hands, no harm would come to him. That was one of the first lessons one learnt, dealing with the gulfs.

There was a frost in the air. Burgess' breath was visible in front of him, and his head was aching with cold. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely to his pursuer.

The voice that came back to him was milder than he'd expected.

"It wasn't your fault."

"No," said Burgess, taking confidence from its conciliatory tone. "It

was an error and I am contrite. I overlooked Kinderman."

"That was a mistake. We all make them," said Hell. "Still, in another hundred years, we'll try again. Democracy is still a new cult: it's not lost its superficial glamour yet. We'll give it another century, and have the best of them then." "Yes."

"But you -"

"I know."

"No power for you, Gregory."

"No."

"It's not the end of the world. Look at me."

"Not at the moment, if you don't mind."

Burgess kept walking, steady step upon steady step. Keep it calm, keep it rational.

"Look at me, please," Hell cooed.

"Later, sir."

"I'm only asking you to look at me. A little respect would be appreciated."

"I will. I will, really. Later."

The corridor divided here. Burgess took the left-hand fork. He thought the symbolism might flatter. It was a cul-de-sac.

Burgess stood still facing the wall. The cold air was in his marrow, and the stumps of his thumbs were really giving him jip. He took off his gloves and sucked, hard.

"Look at me. Turn and look at me," said the courteous voice.

What was he to do now? Back out of the corridor and find another way was best, presumably. He'd just have to walk around and around in circles until he'd argued his point sufficiently well for his pursuer to leave him be. As he stood, juggling the alternatives available to him, he felt a slight ache in his neck.

"Look at me," the voice said again.

And his throat was constricted. There was, strangely, a grinding in his head, the sound of bone rasping bone. It felt like a knife was lodged in the base of his skull.

"Look at me," Hell said one final time, and Burgess' head turned.

Not his body. That stayed standing facing the blank wall of the cul-de-sac.

But his head cranked around on its slender axis, disregarding reason and anatomy. Burgess choked as his gullet twisted on itself like a flesh rope, his vertebrae screwed to powder, his cartilage to fiber mush. His eyes bled, his ears popped, and he died, looking at that sunless, unbegotten face.

"I told you to look at me," said Hell, and went its bitter way, leaving him standing there, a fine paradox for the democrats to find when they came, bustling with words, into the Palace of Westminster.

IX: JACQUELINE ESS: HER WILL AND TESTEMENT

My God, she thought, this can't be living. Day in, day out: the boredom, the drudgery, the frustration. My Christ, she prayed, let me out, set me free, crucify me if you must, but put me out of my misery. In lieu of his euthanasia benediction, she took a blade from Ben's razor, one dull day in late March, locked herself in the bathroom, and slit her wrists.

Through the throbbing in her ears, she faintly heard Ben outside the bathroom door.

"Are you in there, darling?"

"Go away," she thought she said.

"I'm back early, sweetheart. The traffic was light."

"Please go away."

The effort of trying to speak slid her off the toilet seat and on to the white-tiled floor, where pools of her blood were already cooling.

"Darling?"

"Go."

"Darling."

"Away."

"Are you all right?"

Now he was rattling at the door, the rat. Didn't he realize she couldn't open it, wouldn't open it? "Answer me, Jackie."

She groaned. She couldn't stop herself. The pain wasn't as terrible as she'd expected, but there was an ugly feeling, as though she'd been kicked in the head. Still, he couldn't catch her in time, not now. Not even if he broke the door down.

He broke the door down.

She looked up at him through an air grown so thick with death you could have sliced it.

"Too late," she thought she said.

But it wasn't.

My God, she thought, this can't be suicide. I haven't died. The doctor Ben had hired for her was too perfectly benign. Only the best, he'd promised, only the very best for my Jackie.

"It's nothing," the doctor reassured her, “that we can't put right with a little tinkering."

Why doesn't he just come out with it? she thought. He doesn't give a damn. He doesn't know what it's like. "I deal with a lot of these women's problems," he confided, fairly oozing a practiced compassion. "It's got to epidemic proportions among a certain age-bracket."

She was barely thirty. What was he telling her? T hat she was prematurely menopausal?

"Depression, partial or total withdrawal, neuroses of every shape and size. You're not alone, believe me." Oh yes I am, she thought. I'm here in my head, on my own, and you can't know what it's like.

"We'll have you right in two shakes of a lamb's tail." I'm a lamb, am I? Does he think I'm a lamb? Musing, he glanced up at his framed qualifications, then at his manicured nails, then at the pens on his desk and notepad. But he didn't look at Jacqueline. Anywhere but at Jacqueline.

"I know," he was saying now, “what you've been through, and it's been traumatic. Women have certain needs. If they go unanswered -”

What would he know about women's needs?

You're not a woman, she thought.

"What?" he said.

Had she spoken? She shook her head: denying speech. He went on; finding his rhythm once more: "I'm not going to put you through interminable therapy-sessions. You don't want that, do you? You want a little reassurance, and you want something to help you sleep at nights."

He was irritating her badly now. His condescension was so profound it had no bottom. All-knowing, all-seeing Father; that was his performance. As if he were blessed with some miraculous insight into the nature of a woman's soul.

"Of course, I've tried therapy courses with patients in the past. But between you and me -"

He lightly patted her hand. Father's palm on the back of her hand. She was supposed to be flattered, reassured, maybe even seduced.

"- between you and me it's so much talk. Endless talk. Frankly, what good does it do? We've all got problems. You can't talk them away, can you?"

You're not a woman. You don't look like a woman, you don't feel like a woman -"Did you say something?" She shook her head.

"I thought you said something. Please feel free to be honest with me."

She didn't reply, and he seemed to tire of pretending intimacy. He stood up and went to the window. "I think the best thing for you -"

He stood against the light: darkening the room, obscuring the view of the cherry trees on the lawn through the window. She stared at his wide shoulders, at his narrow hips. A fine figure of a man, as Ben would have called him. No child-bearer he. Made to remake the world, a body like that. If not the world, remaking minds would have to do. "I think the best thing for you -"

What did he know, with his hips, with his shoulders? He was too much a man to understand anything of her. "I think the best thing for you would be a course of sedatives -"

Now her eyes were on his waist.

"- and a holiday."

Her mind had focused now on the body beneath the veneer of his clothes. The muscle, bone and blood beneath the elastic skin. She pictured it from all sides, sizing it up, judging its powers of resistance, then closing on it. She thought: Be a woman.

Simply, as she thought that preposterous idea, it began to take shape. Not a fairy-tale transformation, unfortunately, his flesh resisted

such magic. She willed his manly chest into making breasts of itself and it began to swell most fetchingly, until the skin burst and his sternum flew apart.

His pelvis, teased to breaking point, fractured at its centre; unbalanced, he toppled over on to his desk and from there stared up at her, his face yellow with shock. He licked his lips, over and over again, to find some wetness to talk with. His mouth was dry: his words were still-born. It was from between his legs that all the noise was coming; the splashing of his blood; the thud of his bowel on the carpet.

She screamed at the absurd monstrosity she had made, and withdrew to the far corner of the room, where she was sick in the pot of the rubber plant.

My God, she thought, this can't be murder. I didn't so much as touch him.

What Jacqueline had done that afternoon, she kept to herself. No sense in giving people sleepless nights, thinking about such peculiar talent.

The police were very kind. They produced any number of explanations for the sudden departure of Dr Blandish, though none quite described how his chest had erupted in that extraordinary fashion, making two handsome (if hairy) domes of his pectorals.

It was assumed that some unknown psychotic, strong in his insanity, had broken in, done the deed with hands, hammers and saws, and exited, locking the innocent Jacqueline Ess in an appalled silence no interrogation could hope to penetrate.

Person or persons unknown had clearly dispatched the doctor to where neither sedatives nor therapy could help him. She almost forgot for a while. But as the months passed it came back to her by degrees, like a memory of a secret adultery. It teased her with its forbidden delights. She forgot the nausea, and remembered the power. She forgot sordidity, and remembered strength. She forgot the guilt that had seized her afterwards and longed, longed to do it again.

Only better.

"Jacqueline."

Is this my husband, she thought, actually calling me by my name?

Usually it was Jackie, or Jack, or nothing at all. "Jacqueline."

He was looking at her with those big baby blues of his, like the college-boy she'd loved at first sight. But his mouth was harder now, and his kisses tasted like stale bread.

"Jacqueline."

"Yes."

"I've got something I want to speak to you about."

A conversation? she thought, it must be a public holiday.

"I don't know how to tell you this."

"Try me," she suggested.

She knew that she could think his tongue into speaking if it pleased her. Make him tell her what she wanted to hear. Words of love, maybe, if she could remember what they sounded like. But what was the use of that? Better the truth. "Darling, I've gone off the rails a bit."

"What do you mean?" she said.

Have you, you bastard, she thought.

"It was while you weren't quite yourself. You know, when things had more or less stopped between us. Separate rooms… you wanted separate rooms… and I just went bananas with frustration. I didn't want to upset you, so I didn't say anything. But it's no use me trying to live two lives."

"You can have an affair if you want to, Ben."

"It's not an affair, Jackie. I love her -"

He was preparing one of his speeches, she could see it gathering momentum behind his teeth. The justifications that became accusations, those excuses that always turned into assaults on her character. Once he got into full flow there'd be no stopping him. She didn't want to hear.

"- she's not like you at all, Jackie. She's frivolous in her way. I suppose you'd call her shallow." It might be worth interrupting here, she thought, before he ties himself in his usual knots.

"She's not mood y like you. You know, she's just a normal woman. I don't mean to say you're not normal: you can't help having depressions. But she's not so sensitive."

"There's no need, Ben -"

"No, damn it, I want it all off my chest."

On to me, she thought.

"You've never let me explain," he was saying. "You've always given me one of those damn looks of yours, as if you wished I'd -"

Die.

"- wished I'd shut up."

Shut up.

"You don't care how I feel!" He was shouting now. "Always in your own little world."

Shut up, she thought.

His mouth was open. She seemed to wish it closed, and with the thought his jaws snapped together, severing the very tip of his pink tongue. It fell from between his lips and lodged in a fold of his shirt.

Shut up, she thought again.

The two perfect regiments of his teeth ground down into each other, cracking and splitting, nerve, calcium and spit making a pinkish foam on his chin as his mouth collapsed inwards.

Shut up, she was still thinking as his startled baby blues sank back into his skull and his nose wormed its way into his brain.

He was not Ben any longer, he was a man with a red lizard's head, flattening, battening down upon itself, and, thank God, he was past speech-making once and for all.

Now she had the knack of it, she began to take pleasure in the changes she was willing upon him. She flipped him head over heels on to the floor and began to compress his arms and legs, telescoping flesh and resistant bone into a smaller and yet smaller space. His clothes were folded inwards, and the tissue of his stomach was plucked from his neatly packaged entrails and stretched around his body to wrap

him up. His fingers were poking from his shoulder-blades now, and his feet, still thrashing with fury, were tripped up in his gut. She turned him over one final time to pressure his spine into a foot-long column of muck, and that was about the end of it. As she came out of her ecstasy she saw Ben sitting on the floor, shut up into a space about the size of one of his fine leather suitcases, while blood, bile and lymphatic fluid pulsed weakly from his hushed body.

My God, she thought, this can't be my husband. He's never been as tidy as that.

This time she didn't wait for help. This time she knew what she'd done (guessed, even, how she'd done it) and she accepted her crime for the too-rough justice it was.

She packed her bags and left the home.

I'm alive, she thought. For the first time in my whole, wretched life, I'm alive.

Vassi's Testimony (part one)

To you who dream of sweet, strong women I leave this story. It is a promise, as surely as it is a confession, as surely as it's the last words of a lost man who wanted nothing but to love and be loved. I sit here trembling, waiting for the night, waiting for that whining pimp Koos to come to my door again, and take everything I own from me in exchange for the key to her room.

I am not a courageous man, and I never have been: so I'm afraid of what may happen to me tonight. But I cannot go through life dreaming all the time, existing through the darkness on only a glimpse of heaven. Sooner or later, one has to gird one's loins (that's appropriate) and get up and find it. Even if it means giving away the world in exchange.

I probably make no sense. You're thinking, you who chanced on this testimony, you're thinking, who was he, this imbecile?

My name was Oliver Vassi. I am now thirty-eight years old. I was a lawyer, until a year or more ago, when I began the search that ends tonight with that pimp and that key and that holy of holies.

But the story begins more than a year ago. It is many years since Jacqueline Ess first came to me. She arrived out of the blue at my offices, claiming to be the widow of a friend of mine from Law School,

one Benjamin Ess, and when I thought back, I remembered the face. A mutual friend who'd been at the wedding had shown me a photograph of Ben and his blushing bride. And here she was, every bit as elusive a beauty as her photograph promised.

I remember being acutely embarrassed at that first interview. She'd arrived at a busy time, and I was up to my neck in work. But I was so enthralled by her, I let all the day's interviews fall by the wayside, and when my secretary came in she gave me one of her steely glances as if to throw a bucket of cold water over me. I suppose I was enamored from the start, and she sensed the electric atmosphere in my office. Me, I pretended I was merely being polite to the widow of an old friend. I didn't like to think about passion: it wasn't a part of my nature, or so I thought. How little we know – I mean really know - about our capabilities.

Jacqueline told me lies at that first meeting. About how Ben had died of cancer, of how often he had spoken of me, and how fondly. I suppose she could have told me the truth then and there, and I would have lapped it up – I believe I was utterly devoted from the beginning.

But it's difficult to remember quite how and when interest in another human being flares into something more committed, more passionate. It may be that I am inventing the impact she had on me at that first meeting, simply reinventing history to justify my later excesses. I'm not sure. Anyway, wherever and whenever it happened, however quickly or slowly, I succumbed to her, and the affair began.

I'm not a particularly inquisitive man where my friends, or my bed-partners, are concerned. As a lawyer one spends one's time going through the dirt of other people's lives, and frankly, eight hours a day of that is quite enough for me. When I'm out of the office my pleasure is in letting people be. I don't pry, I don't dig, I just take them on face value. Jacqueline was no exception to this rule. She was a woman I was glad to have in my life whatever the truth of her past. She possessed a Marvelous sang-froid, she was witty, bawdy, oblique. I had never met a more enchanting woman. It was none of my business how she'd lived with Ben, what the marriage had been like etc., etc. That was her history. I was happy to live in the present, and let the past die its own death. I think I even flattered myself that whatever pain she had experienced, I could help her forget it.

Certainly her stories had holes in them. As a lawyer, I was trained to be eagle-eyed where fabrications were concerned, and however much I tried to put my perceptions aside I sensed that she wasn't quite

coming clean with me. But everyone has secrets: I knew that. Let her have hers, I thought.

Only once did I challenge her on a detail of her pretended life-story. In talking about Ben's death, she let slip that he had got what he deserved. I asked her what she meant. She smiled, that Gioconda smile of hers, and told me that she felt there was a balance to be redressed between men and women. I let the observation pass. After all, I was obsessed by that time, past all hope of salvation; whatever argument she was putting, I was happy to concede it. She was so beautiful, you see. Not in any two dimensional sense: she wasn't young, she wasn't innocent, she didn't have that pristine symmetry so favoured by ad-men and photographers. Her face was plainly that of a woman in her early forties: it had been used to laugh and cry, and usage leaves its marks. But she had a power to transform herself, in the subtlest way, making that face as various as the sky. Early on, I thought it was a make-up trick. But as we slept together more and more, and I watched her in the mornings, sleep in her eyes, and in the evenings, heavy with fatigue, I soon realized she wore nothing on her skull but flesh and blood. What transformed her was internal: it was a trick of the will.

And, you know, that made me love her all the more.

Then one night I woke with her sleeping beside me. We slept often on the floor, which she preferred to the bed. Beds, she said, reminded her of marriage. Anyway, that night she was lying under a quilt on the carpet of my room, and I, simply out of adoration, was watching her face in sleep.

If one has given oneself utterly, watching the beloved sleep can be a vile experience. Perhaps some of you have known that paralysis, staring down at features closed to your enquiry, locked away from you where you can never, ever go, into the other's mind. As I say, for us who have given ourselves, that is a horror. One knows, in those moments, that one does not exist, except in relation to that face, that personality. Therefore, when that face is closed down, that personality is lost in its own unknowable world, one feels completely without purpose. A planet without a sun, revolving in darkness.

That's how I felt that night, looking down at her extraordinary features, and as I chewed on my soullessness, her face began to alter. She was clearly dreaming; but what dreams must she have been having. Her very fabric was on the move, her muscle, her hair, the down on her cheek moving to the dictates of some internal tide. Her

lips bloomed from her bone, boiling up into a slavering tower of skin; her hair swirled around her head as though she were lying in water; the substance of her cheeks formed furrows and ridges like the ritual scars on a warrior; inflamed and throbbing patterns of tissue, swelling up and changing again even as a pattern formed. This fluxion was a terror to me, and I must have made some noise. She didn't wake, but came a little closer to the surface of sleep, leaving the deeper waters where these powers were sourced. The patterns sank away in an instant, and her face was again that of a gently sleeping woman.

That was, you can understand, a pivotal experience, even though I spent the next few days trying to convince myself that I hadn't seen it.

The effort was useless. I knew there was something wrong with her; and at that time I was certain she knew nothing about it. I was convinced that something in her system was awry, and that I was best to investigate her history before I told her what I had seen.

On reflection, of course, that seems laughably naive. To think she wouldn't have known that she contained such a power. But it was easier for me to picture her as prey to such skill, than mistress of it. That's a man speaking of a woman; not just me, Oliver Vassi, of her, Jacqueline Ess. We cannot believe, we men, that power will ever reside happily in the body of a woman, unless that power is a male child. Not true power. The power must be in male hands, God-given. That's what our fathers tell us, idiots that they are.

Anyway, I investigated Jacqueline, as surreptitiously as I could. I had a contact in York where the couple had lived, and it wasn't difficult to get some enquiries moving. It took a week for my contact to get back to m e, because he'd had to cut through a good deal of shit from the police to get a hint of the truth, but the news came, and it was bad. Ben was dead, that much was true. But there was no way he had died of cancer. My contact had only got the vaguest clues as to the condition of Ben's corpse, but he gathered it had been spectacularly mutilated. And the prime suspect? My beloved Jacqueline Ess. The same innocent woman who was occupying my flat, sleeping by my side every night.

So, I put it to her that she was hiding something from me. I don't know what I was expecting in return. What I got was a demonstration of her power. She gave it freely, without malice, but I would have been a fool not to have read a warning into it. She told me first how she had discovered her unique control over the sum and substance of human beings. In her despair, she said, when she was on the verge of

killing herself, she had found, in the very deep-water trenches of her nature, faculties she had never known existed. Powers which came up out of those regions as she recovered, like fish to the light.

Then she showed me the smallest measure of these powers, plucking hairs from my head, one by one. Only a dozen; just to demonstrate her formidable skills. I felt them going. She just said: one from behind your ear, and I'd feel my skin creep and then jump as fingers of her volition snatched a hair out. Then another, and another. It was an incredible display; she had this power down to a fine art, locating and withdrawing single hairs from my scalp with the precision of tweezers.

Frankly, I was sitting there rigid with fear, knowing that she was just toying with me. Sooner or later, I was certain the time would be right for her to silence me permanently.

But she had doubts about herself. She told me how the skill, though she had honed it, scared her. She needed, she said, someone to teach her how to use it best. And I was not that somebody. I was just a man who loved her, who had loved her before this revelation, and would love her still, in spite of it.

In fact, after that display I quickly came to accommodate a new vision of Jacqueline. Instead of fearing her, I became more devoted to this woman who tolerated my possession of her body.

My work became an irritation, a distraction that came between me and thinking of my beloved. What reputation I had began to deteriorate; I lost briefs, I lost credibility. In the space of two or three months my professional life dwindled away to almost nothing. Friends despaired of me, colleagues avoided me.

It wasn't that she was feeding on me. I want to be clear about that. She was no lamia, no succubus. What happened to me, my fall from grace with ordinary life if you like, was of my own making. She didn't bewitch me; that's a romantic lie to excuse rape. She was a sea: and I had to swim in her. Does that make any sense? I'd lived my life on the shore, in the solid world of law, and I was tired of it. She was liquid; a boundless sea in a single body, a deluge in a small room, and I will gladly drown in her, if she grants me the chance. But that was my decision. Understand that. This has always been my decision. I have decided to go to the room tonight, and be with her one final time. That is of my own free will.

And what man would not? She was (is) sublime.

For a month after that demonstration of power I lived in a permanent ecstasy of her. When I was with her she showed me ways to love beyond the limits of any other creature on God's earth. I say beyond the limits: with her there were no limits. And when I was away from her the reverie continued: because she seemed to have changed my world.

Then she left me.

I knew why: she'd gone to find someone to teach her how to use strength. But understanding her reasons made it no easier.

I broke down: lost my job, lost my identity, lost the few friends I had left in the world. I scarcely noticed. They were minor losses, beside the loss of Jacqueline…"

"Jacqueline."

My God, she thought, can this really be the most influential man in the country? He looked so unprepossessing, so very unspectacular. His chin wasn't even strong.

But Titus Penifer was power.

He ran more monopolies than he could count; his word in the financial world could break companies like sticks, destroying the ambitions of hundreds, the careers of thousands. Fortunes were made overnight in his shadow, entire corporations fell when he blew on them, casualties of his whim. This man knew power if any man knew it. He had to be learned from.

"You wouldn't mind if I called you J., would you?"

"No."

"Have you been waiting long?"

"Long enough."

"I don't normally leave beautiful women waiting."

"Yes you do."

She knew him already: two minutes in his presence was enough to find his measure. He would come quickest to her if she was quietly

insolent.

"Do you always call women you've never met before by their initials?"

"It's convenient for filing; do you mind?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"What I get in return for giving you the privilege."

"It's a privilege, is it, to know your name?"

"Yes."

"Well… I'm flattered. Unless of course you grant that privilege widely?"

She shook her head. No, he could see she wasn't profligate with her affections.

"Why have you waited so long to see me?" he said. "Why have I had reports of your wearing my secretaries down with your constant demands to meet with me? Do you want money? Because if you do you'll go away empty handed. I became rich by being mean, and the richer I get, the meaner I become."

The remark was truth; he spoke it plainly.

"I don't want money," she said, equally plainly.

"That's refreshing."

"There's richer than you."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. She could bite, this beauty.

"True," he said. There were at least half a dozen richer men in the hemisphere.

"I'm not an adoring little nobody. I haven't come here to screw a name. I've come here because we can be together. We have a great deal to offer each other."

"Such as?" he said.

"I have my body."

He smiled. It was the straightest offer he'd heard in years.

"And what do I offer you in return for such largesse?"

"I want to learn -”

"Learn?"

"- how to use power."

She was stranger and stranger, this one.

"What do you mean?" he replied, playing for time. He hadn't got the measure of her; she vexed him, confounded him.

"Shall I recite it for you again, in bourgeois?" she said, playing insolence with such a smile he almost felt attractive again.

"No need. You want to learn to use power. I suppose I could teach you -”

"I know you can."

"You realize I'm a married man. Virginia and I have been together eighteen years."

"You have three sons, four houses, a maid-servant called Mirabelle. You loathe New York, and you love Bangkok; your shirt collar is 161/2, your favourite colour green."

"Turquoise."

"You're getting subtler in your old age."

"I'm not old."

"Eighteen years a married man. It ages you prematurely."

"Not me."

"Prove it."

"How?"

"Take me."

"What?"

"Take me."

"Here?"

"Draw the blinds, lock the door, turn off the computer terminal, and take me. I dare you."

"Dare?"

How long was it since anyone had dared him to do anything?

"Dare?"

He was excited. He hadn't been so excited in a dozen years. He drew the blinds, locked the door, turned off the video display of his fortunes.

My God, she thought, I've got him.

It wasn't an easy passion, not like that with Vassi. For one thing, Pettifer was a clumsy, uncultured lover. For another, he was too nervous of his wife to be a wholly successful adulterer. He thought he saw Virginia everywhere: in the lobbies of the hotels they took a room in for the afternoon, in cabs cruising the street outside their rendezvous, once even (he swore the likeness was exact) dressed as a waitress, and swabbing down a table in a restaurant. All fictional fears, but they dampened the spontaneity of the romance somewhat.

Still, she was learning from him. He was as brilliant a potentate as he was inept a lover. She learned how to be powerful without exercising power, how to keep one's self uncontaminated by the foulness all charisma stirs up in the uncharismatic; how to make the plain decisions plainly; how to be merciless. Not that she needed much education in that particular quarter. Perhaps it was more truthful to say he taught her never to regret her absence of instinctive compassion, but to judge with her intellect alone who deserved extinction and who might be numbered amongst the righteous.

Not once did she show herself to him, though she used her skills in the most secret of ways to tease pleasure out of his stale nerves.

In the fourth week of their affair they were lying side by side in a lilac room, while the mid-afternoon traffic growled in the street below. It had been a bad bout of sex; he was nervous, and no tricks

would coax him out of himself. It was over quickly, almost without heat.

He was going to tell her something. She knew it: it was waiting, this revelation, somewhere at the back of his throat. Turning to him she massaged his temples with her mind, and soothed him into speech.

He was about to spoil the day.

He was about to spoil his career.

He was about, God help him, to spoil his life.

"I have to stop seeing you," he said.

He wouldn't dare, she thought.

"I'm not sure what I know about you, or rather, what I think I know about you, but it makes me… cautious of you, J. Do you understand?"

"No."

"I'm afraid I suspect you of… crimes."

"Crimes?"

"You have a history."

"Who's been rooting?" she asked. "Surely not Virginia?"

"No, not Virginia, she's beyond curiosity."

"Who then?"

"It's not your business."

"Who?"

She pressed lightly on his temples. It hurt him and he winced.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"My head's aching."

"Tension, that's all, just tension. I can take it away, Titus." She touched her fingers to his forehead, relaxing her hold on him. He sighed as relief came.

"Is that better?"

"Yes."

"Who's been snooping, Titus?"

"I have a personal secretary. Lyndon. You've heard me speak of him. He knew about our relationship from the beginning. Indeed, he books the hotels, arranges my cover stories for Virginia."

There was a sort of boyishness in this speech, that was rather touching. As though he was embarrassed to leave her, rather than heartbroken. "Lyndon's quite a miracle-worker. He's maneuvered a lot of things to make it easier between us. So he's got nothing against you. It's just that he happened to see one of the photographs I took of you. I gave them to him to shred."

"Why?"

"I shouldn't have taken them; it was a mistake. Virginia might have…" He paused, began again. "Anyhow, he recognized you, although he couldn't remember where he'd seen you before."

"But he remembered eventually."

"He used to work for one of my newspapers, as a gossip columnist. That's how he came to be my personal assistant. He remembered you from your previous incarnation, as it were. Jacqueline Ess, the wife of Benjamin Ess, deceased."

"Deceased."

"He brought me some other photographs, not as pretty as the ones of you."

"Photographs of what?"

"Your home. And the body of your husband. They said it was a body, though in God's name there was precious little human being left in it."

"There was precious little to start with," she said simply, thinking of Ben's cold eyes, and colder hands. Fit only to be shut up, and forgotten.

"What happened?"

"To Ben? He was killed."

"How?" Did his voice waver a little?

"Very easily." She had risen from the bed, and was standing by the window. Strong summer light carved its way through the slats of the blind, ridges of shadow and sunlight charting the contours of her face.

"You did it."

"Yes." He had taught her to be plain. "Yes, I did it."

He had taught her an economy of threat too. "Leave me, and I'll do the same again."

He shook his head. "Never. You wouldn't dare."

He was standing in front of her now.

"We must understand each other, J. I am powerful and I am pure. Do you see? My public face isn't even touched by a glimmer of scandal. I could afford a mistress, a dozen mistresses, to be revealed. But a murderess? No, that would spoil my life."

"Is he blackmailing you? This Lyndon?"

He stared at the day through the blinds, with a crippled look on his face. There was a twitch in the nerves of his cheek, under his left eye.

"Yes, if you must know," he said in a dead voice. "The bastard has me for all I'm worth."

"I see."

"And if he can guess, so can others. You understand?"

"I'm strong: you're strong. We can twist them around our little fingers."

"No."

"Yes! I have skills, Titus."

"I don't want to know."

"You will know," she said.

She looked at him, taking hold of his hands without touching him. He watched, all astonished eyes, as his unwilling hands were raised to touch her face, to stroke her hair with the fondest of gestures. She made him run his trembling fingers across her breasts, taking them with more ardour than he could summon on his own initiative. "You are always too tentative, Titus," she said, making him paw her almost to the point of bruising. "This is how I like it." Now his hands were lower, fetching out a different look from her face. Tides were moving over it, she was all alive -”Deeper -”

His finger intruded, his thumb stroked.

"I like that, Titus. Why can't you do that to me without me demanding?"

He blushed. He didn't like to talk about what they did together. She coaxed him deeper, whispering. "I won't break, you know. Virginia may be Dresden china, I'm not. I want feeling; I want something that I can remember you by when I'm not with you. Nothing is everlasting, is it? But I want something to keep me warm through the night."

He was sinking to his knees, his hands kept, by her design, on her and in her, still roving like two lustful crabs. His body was awash with sweat. It was, she thought, the first time she'd ever seen him sweat.

"Don't kill me," he whimpered.

"I could wipe you out." Wipe, she thought, then put the image out of her mind before she did him some harm. "I know. I know," he said. "You can kill me easily."

He was crying. My God, she thought, the great man is at my feet, sobbing like a baby. What can I learn of power from this puerile performance? She plucked the tears off his cheeks, using rather more strength than the task required. His skin reddened under her gaze.

"Let me be, J. I can't help you. I'm useless to you."

It was true. He was absolutely useless. Contemptuously, she let his hands go. They fell limply by his sides. "Don't ever try and find me, Titus. You understand? Don't ever send your minions after me to preserve your reputation, because I will be more merciless than you've ever been."

He said nothing; just knelt there, facing the window, while she washed her face, drank the coffee they'd ordered, and left.

Lyndon was surprised to find the door of his office ajar. It was only seven-thirty-six. None of the secretaries would be in for another hour. Clearly one of the cleaners had been remiss, leaving the door unlocked. He'd find out who: sack her.

He pushed the door open.

Jacqueline was sitting with her back to the door. He recognized the back of her head, that fall of auburn hair. A sluttish display; too teased, too wild. His office, an annex to Mr. Pettifer's, was kept meticulously ordered. He glanced over it: everything seemed to be in place.

"What are you doing here?"

She took a little breath, preparing herself.

This was the first time she had planned to do it. Before it had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. He was approaching the desk, and putting down his briefcase and his neatly-folded copy of the Financial Times. "You have no right to come in here without my permission," he said.

She turned on the lazy swivel of his chair; the way he did when he had people in to discipline. "Lyndon," she said.

"Nothing you can say or do will change the facts, Mrs Ess," he said, saving her the trouble of introducing the subject, “you are a cold-blooded killer. It was my bounden duty to inform Mr. Pettifer of the situation." "You did it for the good of Titus?"

"Of course."

"And the blackmail, that was also for the good of Titus, was it?"

"Get out of my office -”

"Was it, Lyndon?"

"You're a whore! Whores know nothing: they are ignorant, diseased animals," he spat. "Oh, you're cunning, I grant you that – but then so's any slut with a living to make."

She stood up. He expected a riposte. He got none; at least not verbally. But he felt a tautness across his face: as though someone was pressing on it.

"What… are… you… doing?" he said.

"Doing?"

His eyes were being forced into slits like a child imitating a monstrous Oriental, his mouth was hauled wide and tight, his smile brilliant. The words were difficult to say -"Stop…it…" She shook her head. "Whore…" he said again, still defying her. She just stared at him. His face was beginning to jerk and twitch under the pressure, the muscles going into spasm.

"The police…" he tried to say, "if you lay a finger on me…"

"I won't," she said, and pressed home her advantage. Beneath his clothes he felt the same tension all over his body, pulling his skin, drawing him tighter and tighter.

Something was going to give; he knew it. Some part of him would be weak, and tear under this relentless assault. And if he once began to break open, nothing would prevent her ripping him apart. He worked all this out quite coolly, while his body twitched and he swore at her through his enforced grin.

"Cunt," he said. "Syphilitic cunt."

He didn't seem to be afraid, she thought.

In extremis he just unleashed so much hatred of her, the fear was entirely eclipsed. Now he was calling her a whore again; though his face was distorted almost beyond recognition.

And then he began to split.

The tear began at the bridge of his nose and ran up, across his brow, and down, bisecting his lips and his chin, then his neck and chest. In a matter of seconds his shirt was dyed red, his dark suit darkening further, his cuffs and trouser-legs pouring blood. The skin flew off his hands like gloves off a surgeon, and two rings of scarlet tissue lolled down to either side of his flayed face like the ears of an elephant.

His name-calling had stopped.

He had been dead of shock now for ten seconds, though she was still working him over vengefully, tugging his skin off his body and flinging the scraps around the room, until at last he stood, steaming, in his red suit, and his red shirt, and his shiny red shoes, and looked,

to her eyes, a little more like a sensitive man. Content with the effect, she released him. He lay down quietly in a blood puddle and slept.

My God, she thought, as she calmly took the stairs out the back way, that was murder in the first degree.

She saw no reports of the death in any of the papers, and nothing on the news bulletins. Lyndon had apparently died as he had lived, hidden from public view.

But she knew wheels, so big their hubs could not be seen by insignificant individuals like herself, would be moving. What they would do, how they would change her life, she could only guess at. But the murder of Lyndon had not simply been spite, though that had been a part of it. No, she'd also wanted to stir them up, her enemies in the world, and bring them after her. Let them show their hands: let them show their contempt, their terror. She'd gone through her life, it seemed, looking for a sign of herself, only able to define her nature by the look in others' eyes. Now she wanted an end to that. It was time to deal with her pursuers.

Surely now everyone who had seen her, Pettifer first, then Vassi, would come after her, and she would close their eyes permanently: make them forgetful of her. Only then, the witnesses destroyed, would she be free. Pettifer didn't come, of course, not in person. It was easy for him to find agents, men without scruple or compassion, but with a nose for pursuit that would shame a bloodhound.

A trap was being laid for her, though she couldn't yet see its jaws. There were signs of it everywhere. An eruption of birds from behind a wall, a peculiar light from a distant window, footsteps, whistles, dark-suited men reading the news at the limit of her vision. As the weeks passed they didn't come any closer to her, but then neither did they go away. They waited, like cats in a tree, their tails twitching, their eyes lazy.

But the pursuit had Pettifer's mark. She'd learned enough from him to recognize his circumspection and his guile. They would come for her eventually, not in her time, but in theirs. Perhaps not even in theirs: in his. And though she never saw his face, it was as though Titus was on her heels personally.

My God, she thought, I'm in danger of my life and I don't care.

It was useless, this power over flesh, if it had no direction behind it. She had used it for her own petty reasons, for the gratification of

nervous pleasure and sheer anger. But these displays hadn't brought her any closer to other people: they just made her a freak in their eyes.

Sometimes she thought of Vassi, and wondered where he was, what he was doing. He hadn't been a strong man, but he'd had a little passion in his soul. More than Ben, more than Pettifer, certainly more than Lyndon. And, she remembered, fondly, he was the only man she'd ever known who had called her Jacqueline. All the rest had manufactured unendearing corruptions of her name: Jackie, or J., or, in Ben's more irritating moods, Ju-ju. Only Vassi had called her Jacqueline, plain and simple, accepting, in his formal way, the completeness of her, the totality of her. And when she thought of him, tried to picture how he might return to her, she feared for him.

Vassi's Testimony (part two)

Of course I searched for her. It's only when you've lost someone that you realize the nonsense of that phrase 'it's a small world'. It isn't. It's a vast, devouring world, especially if you're alone.

When I was a lawyer, locked in that incestuous coterie, I used to see the same faces day after day. Some I'd exchange words with, some smiles, some nods. We belonged, even if we were enemies at the Bar, to the same complacent circle. We ate at the same tables, we drank elbow to elbow. We even shared mistresses, though we didn't always know it at the time. In such circumstances, it's easy to believe the world means you no harm. Certainly you grow older, but then so does everyone else. You even believe, in your self-satisfied way, that the passage of years makes you a little wiser. Life is bearable; even the 3 a.m. sweats come more infrequently as the bank-balance swells. But to think that the world is harmless is to lie to yourself, to believe in so-called certainties that are, in fact, simply shared delusions.

When she left, all the delusions fell away, and all the lies I had assiduously lived by became strikingly apparent. It's not a small world, when there's only one face in it you can bear to look upon, and that face is lost somewhere in a maelstrom. It's not a small world when the few, vital memories of your object of affection are in danger of being trampled out by the thousands of moments that assail you every day, like children tugging at you, demanding your sole attention.

I was a broken man.

I would find myself (there's an apt phrase) sleeping in tiny

bedrooms in forlorn hotels, drinking more often than eating, and writing her name, like a classic obsessive, over and over again. On the walls, on the pillow, on the palm of my hand. I broke the skin of my palm with my pen, and the ink infected it. The mark's still there, I'm looking at it now. Jacqueline it says. Jacqueline.

Then one day, entirely by chance, I saw her. It sounds melodramatic, but I thought I was going to die at that moment. I'd imagined her for so long, keyed myself up for seeing her again, that when it happened I felt my limbs weaken, and I was sick in the middle of the street. Not a classic reunion. The lover, on seeing his beloved, throws up down his shirt. But then, nothing that happened between Jacqueline and myself was ever quite normal. Or natural. I followed her, which was difficult. There were crowds, and she was walking fast. I didn't know whether to call out her name or not. I decided not. What would she have done anyway, seeing this unshaven lunatic shambling towards her, calling her name? She would have run probably. Or worse, she would have reached into my chest, seizing my heart in her will, and put me out of my misery before I could reveal her to the world.

So I was silent, and simply followed her, doggedly, to what I assumed was her apartment. And I stayed there, or in the vicinity, for the next two and a half days, not quite knowing what to do. It was a ridiculous dilemma. After all this time of watching for her, now that she was within speaking distance, touching distance, I didn't dare approach. Maybe I feared death. But then, here I am, in this stinking room in Amsterdam, setting my testimony down and waiting for Koos to bring me her key, and I don't fear death now. Probably it was my vanity that prevented me from approaching her. I didn't want her to see me cracked and desolate; I wanted to come to her clean, her dream-lover. While I waited, they came for her.

I don't know who they were. Two men, plainly dressed. I don't think policemen: too smooth. Cultured even. And she didn't resist. She went smilingly, as if to the opera.

At the first opportunity I returned to the building a little better dressed, located her apartment from the porter, and broke in. She had been living plainly. In one corner of the room she had set up a table, and had been writing her memoirs. I sat down and read, and eventually took the pages away with me. She had got no further than the first seven years of her life. I wondered, again in my vanity, if I would have been chronicled in the book. Probably not. I took some of her clothes too; only items she had worn when I had known her. And

nothing intimate: I'm not a fetishist. I wasn't going to go home and bury my face in the smell of her underwear. But I wanted something to remember her by; to picture her in. Though on reflection I never met a human being more fitted to dress purely in her skin.

So I lost her a second time, more the fault of my own cowardice than circumstance.

Pettifer didn't come near the house they were keeping Mrs Ess in for four weeks. She was given more or less everything she asked for, except her freedom, and she only asked for that in the most abstracted fashion. She wasn't interested in escape: though it would have been easy to achieve. Once or twice she wondered if Titus had told the two men and the woman who were keeping her a prisoner in the house exactly what she was capable of: she guessed not. They treated her as though she were simply a woman Titus had set eyes on and desired. They had procured her for his bed, simple as that.

Vassi's Testimony (final part)

With a room to herself, and an endless supply of paper, she began to write her memoirs again, from the beginning. It was late summer, and the nights were getting chilly. Sometimes, to warm herself, she would lie on the floor, (she'd asked them to remove the bed) and will her body to ripple like the surface of a lake. Her body, without sex, became a mystery to her again; and she realized for the first time that physical love had been an exploration of that most intimate, and yet most unknown region of her being: her flesh. She had understood herself best embracing someone else: seen her own substance clearly only when another's lips were laid on it, adoring and gentle. She thought of Vassi again; and the lake, at the thought of him, was roused as if by a tempest. Her breasts shook into curling mountains, her belly ran with extraordinary tides, currents crossed and recrossed her flickering face, lapping at her mouth and leaving their mark like waves on sand. As she was fluid in his memory, so as she remembered him, she liquefied.

She thought of the few times she had been at peace in her life; and physical love, discharging ambition and vanity, had always preceded those fragile moments. There were other ways presumably; but her experience had been limited. Her mother had always said that women, being more at peace with themselves than men needed fewer distractions from their hurts. But she'd not found it like that at all. She'd found her life full of hurts, but almost empty of ways to salve them.

She left off writing her memoirs when she reached her ninth year. She despaired of telling her story from that point on, with the first realization of on-coming puberty. She burnt the papers on a bonfire she lit in the middle of her room the day that Pettifer arrived.

My God, she thought, this can't be power.

Pettifer looked sick; as physically changed as a friend she'd lost to cancer. One month seemingly healthy, the next sucked up from the inside, self-devoured. He looked like a husk of a man: his skin grey and mottled. Only his eyes glittered, and those like the eyes of a mad dog.

He was dressed immaculately, as though for a wedding.

"J."

"Titus."

He looked her up and down.

"Are you well?"

"Thank you, yes."

"They give you everything you ask for?"

"Perfect hosts."

"You haven't resisted."

"Resisted?"

"Being here. Locked up. I was prepared, after Lyndon, for another slaughter of the innocents." "Lyndon was not innocent, Titus. These people are. You didn't tell them."

"I didn't deem it necessary. May I close the door?" H e was her captor: but he came like an emissary to the camp of a greater power. She liked the way he was with her, cowed but elated. He closed the door, and locked it. "I love you, J. And I fear you. In fact, I think I love you because I fear you. Is that a sickness?" "I would have thought so."

"Yes, so would I."

"Why did you take such a time to come?"

"I had to put my affairs in order. Otherwise there would have been chaos. When I was gone."

"You're leaving?"

He looked into her, the muscles of his face ruffled by anticipation.

"I hope so."

"Where to?"

Still she didn't guess what had brought him to the house, his affairs neatened, his wife unknowingly asked forgiveness of as she slept, all channels of escape closed, all contradictions laid to rest.

Still she didn't guess he'd come to die.

"I'm reduced by you, J. Reduced to nothing. And there is nowhere for me to go. Do you follow?" "No."

"I cannot live without you," he said. The clichй was unpardonable. Could he not have found a better way to say it? She almost laughed, it was so trite.

But he hadn't finished.

"- and I certainly can't live with you." Abruptly, the tone changed. "Because you revolt me, woman, your whole being disgusts me."

"So?" she asked, softly.

"So…" He was tender again and she began to understand."… kill me."

It was grotesque. The glittering eyes were steady on her.

"It's what I want," he said. "Believe me, it's all I want in the world. Kill me, however you please. I'll go without resistance, without complaint."

She remembered the old joke. Masochist to Sadist: Hurt me! For God's sake, hurt me! Sadist to Masochist: No. "And if I refuse?" she said.

"You can't refuse. I'm loathsome."

"But I don't hate you, Titus."

"You should. I'm weak. I'm useless to you. I taught you nothing."

"You taught me a great deal. I can control myself now."

"Lyndon's death was controlled, was it?"

"Certainly."

"It looked a little excessive to me."

"He got everything he deserved."

"Give me what I deserve, then, in my turn. I've locked you up. I've rejected you when you needed me. Punish me for it."

"I survived."

"J!"

Even in this extremity he couldn't call her by her full name.

"Please to God. Please to God. I need only this one thing from you. Do it out of whatever motive you have in you. Compassion, or contempt, or love. But do it, please do it."

"No," she said.

He crossed the room suddenly, and slapped her, very hard.

"Lyndon said you were a whore. He was right; you are. Gutter slut, nothing better."

He walked away, turned, walked back, hither again, faster, harder, and again, six or seven times, backwards and forwards.

Then he stopped, panting.

"You want money?" Bargains now. Blows, then bargains. She was seeing him twisted through tears of shock, which she was unable to prevent.

"Do you want money?" he said again.

"What do you think?"

He didn't hear her sarcasm, and began to scatter notes around her feet, dozens and dozens of them, like offerings around the Statue of

the Virgin.

"Anything you want," he said, "Jacqueline."

In her belly she felt something close to pain as the urge to kill him found birth, but she resisted it. It was playing into his hands, becoming the instrument of his will: powerless. Usage again; that's all she ever got. She had been bred like a cow, to give a certain supply. Of care to husbands, of milk to babies, of death to old men. And, like a cow, she was expected to be compliant with every demand made of her, whenever the call came. Well, not this time. She went to the door.

"Where are you going?" She reached for the key.

"Your death is your own business, not mine," she said.

He ran at her before she could unlock the door, and the blow – in its force, in its malice – was totally unexpected. "Bitch!" he shrieked, a hail of blows coming fast upon the first.

In her stomach, the thing that wanted to kill grew a little larger.

He had his fingers tangled in her hair, and pulled her back into the room, shouting obscenities at her, an endless stream of them, as though he'd opened a dam full of sewer-water on her. This was just another way for him to get what he wanted she told herself, if you succumb to this you've lost: he's just manipulating you. Still the words came: the same dirty words that had been thrown at generations of unsubmissive women. Whore; heretic; cunt; bitch; monster.

Yes, she was that.

Yes, she thought: monster I am.

The thought made it easy. She turned. He knew what she intended even before she looked at him. He dropped his hands from her head. Her anger was already in her throat coming out of her – crossing the air between them. Monster he calls me: monster I am.

I do this for myself, not for him. Never for him. For myself!

He gasped as her will touched him, and the glittering eyes stopped glittering for a moment, the will to die became the will to survive, all too late of course, and he roared. She heard answering shouts, steps, threats on the stairs. They would be in the room in a matter of moments.

"You are an animal," she said.

"No," he said, certain even now that his place was in command.

"You don't exist," she said, advancing on him. "They'll never find the part that was Titus. Titus is gone. The rest is just -"

The pain was terrible. It stopped even a voice coming out from him. Or was that her again, changing his throat, his palate, his very head? She was unlocking the plates of his skull, and reorganizing him.

No, he wanted to say, this isn't the subtle ritual I had planned. I wanted to die folded into you, I wanted to go with my mouth clamped to yours, cooling in you as I died. This is not the way I want it.

No. No. No.

They were at the door, the men who'd kept her here, beating on it. She had no fear of them, of course, except that they might spoil her handiwork before the final touches were added to it.

Someone was hurling themselves at the door now. Wood splintered: the door was flung open. The two men were both armed. They pointed their weapons at her, steady-handed.

"Mr. Pettifer?" said the younger man. In the corner of the room, under the table, Pettifer's eyes shone. "Mr. Pettifer?" he said again, forgetting the woman. Pettifer shook his snouted head. Don't come any closer, please, he thought.

The man crouched down and stared under the table at the disgusting beast that was squatting there; bloody from its transformation, but alive. She had killed his nerves: he felt no pain. He just survived, his hands knotted into paws, his legs scooped up around his back, knees broken so he had the look of a four-legged crab, his brain exposed, his eyes lidless, lower jaw broken and swept up over his top jaw like a bulldog, ears torn off, spine snapped, humanity bewitched into another state.

"You are an animal," she'd said. It wasn't a bad facsimile of beast hood.

The man with the gun gagged as he recognized fragments of his master. He stood up, greasy-chinned, and glanced around at the woman.

Jacqueline shrugged.

"You did this?" Awe mingled with the revulsion.

She nodded.

"Come Titus," she said, clicking her fingers.

The beast shook its head, sobbing.

"Come Titus," she said more forcefully, and Titus Pettifer waddled out of his hiding place, leaving a trail like a punctured meat-sack.

The man fired at Pettifer's remains out of sheer instinct. Anything, anything at all to prevent this disgusting creature from approaching him.

Titus stumbled two steps back on his bloody paws, shook himself as if to dislodge the death in him, and failing, died. "Content?" she asked.

The gunman looked up from the execution. Was the power talking to him? No; Jacqueline was staring at Pettifer's corpse, asking the question of him. Content?

The gunman dropped his weapon. The other man did the same.

"How did this happen?" asked the man at the door. A simple question: a child's question.

"He asked," said Jacqueline. "It was all I could give him."

The gunman nodded, and fell to his knees.

"Chance has played a worryingly large part in my romance with Jacqueline Ess. Sometimes it's seemed I've been subject to every tide that passes through the world, spun around by the merest flick of accident's wrist. Other times I've had the suspicion that she was masterminding my life, as she was the lives of a hundred others, a thousand others, arranging every fluke meeting, choreographing my victories and my defeats, escorting me, blindly, towards this last encounter.

I found her without knowing I'd found her, that was the irony of it. I'd traced her first to a house in Surrey, a house that had a year previous seen the murder of one Titus Pettifer, a billionaire shot by one of his own bodyguards. In the upstairs room, where the murder had taken place, all was serenity. If she had been there, they had

removed any sign. But the house, now in virtual ruin, was prey to all manner of graffiti; and on the stained plaster wall of that room someone had scrawled a woman. She was obscenely over-endowed, her gaping sex blazing with what looked like lightning. And at her feet there was a creature of indeterminate species. Perhaps a crab, perhaps a dog, perhaps even a man. Whatever it was it had no power over itself. It sat in the light of her agonizing presence and counted itself amongst the fortunate. Looking at that wizened creature, with its eyes turned up to gaze on the burning Madonna, I knew the picture was a portrait of Jacqueline.

I don't know how long I stood looking at the graffiti, but I was interrupted by a man who looked to be in a worse condition than me. A beard that had never been trimmed or washed, a frame so wasted I wondered how he managed to stand upright, and a smell that would not have shamed a skunk.

I never knew his name: but he was, he told me, the maker of the picture on the wall. It was easy to believe that. His desperation, his hunger, his confusion were all marks of a man who had seen Jacqueline.

If I was rough in my interrogation of him I'm sure he forgave me. It was an unburdening for him, to tell everything he'd seen the day that Pettifer had been killed, and know that I believed it all. He told me his fellow bodyguard, the man who had fired the shots that had killed Pettifer, had committed suicide in prison.

His life, he said, was meaningless. She had destroyed it. I gave him what reassurances I could; that she meant no harm, and that he needn't fear that she would come for him. When I told him that, he cried, more, I think, out of loss than relief.

Finally I asked him if he knew where Jacqueline was now. I'd left that question to the end, though it had been the most pressing enquiry, because I suppose I didn't dare hope he'd know. But my God, he did. She had not left the house immediately after the shooting of Pettifer. She had sat down with this man, and talked to him quietly about his children, his tailor, his car. She'd asked him what his mother had been like, and he'd told her his mother had been a prostitute. Had she been happy? Jacqueline had asked. He'd said he didn't know. Did she ever cry, she'd asked. He'd said he never saw her laugh or cry in his life. And she'd nodded, and thanked him.

Later, before his suicide, the other gunman had told him Jacqueline

had gone to Amsterdam. This he knew for a fact, from a man called Koos. And so the circle begins to close, yes?

I was in Amsterdam seven weeks, without finding a single clue to her whereabouts, until yesterday evening. Seven weeks of celibacy, which is unusual for me. Listless with frustration I went down to the red-light district, to find a woman. They sit there you know, in the windows, like mannequins, beside pink-fringed lamps. Some have miniature dogs on their laps; some read. Most just stare out at the street, as if mesmerized.

There were no faces there that interested m e. They all seemed joyless, lightless, too much unlike her. Yet I couldn't leave. I was like a fat boy in a sweet shop, too nauseous to buy, too gluttonous to go.

Towards the middle of the night, I was spoken to out of the crowd by a young man who, on closer inspection, was not young at all, but heavily made up. He had no eyebrows, just pencil marks drawn on to his shiny skin. A cluster of gold earrings in his left ear, a half-eaten peach in his white-gloved hand, open sandals, lacquered toenails. He took hold of my sleeve, proprietarily.

I must have sneered at his sickening appearance, but he didn't seem at all upset by my contempt. You look like a man of discernment, he said. I looked nothing of the kind: you must be mistaken, I said. No, he replied, I am not mistaken. You are Oliver Vassi.

My first thought, absurdly, was that he intended to kill me. I tried to pull away; his grip on my cuff was relentless. You want a woman, he said. Did I hesitate enough for him to know I meant yes, though I said no? I have a woman like no other, he went on, she's a miracle. I know you'll want to meet her in the flesh.

What made me know it was Jacqueline he was talking about? Perhaps the fact that he had known me from out of the crowd, as though she was up at a window somewhere, ordering her admirers to be brought to her like a diner ordering lobster from a tank. Perhaps too the way his eyes shone at me, meeting mine without fear because fear, like rapture, he felt only in the presence of one creature on God's cruel earth. Could I not also see myself reflected in his perilous look? He knew Jacqueline, I had no doubt of it.

He knew I was hooked, because once I hesitated he turned away from me with a mincing shrug, as if to say: you missed your chance. Where is she? I said, seizing his twig-thin arm. He cocked his head

down the street and I followed him, suddenly as witless as an idiot, out of the throng. The road emptied as we walked; the red lights gave way to gloom, and then to darkness. If I asked him where we were going once I asked him a dozen times; he chose not to answer, until we reached a narrow door in a narrow house down some razor-thin street. We're here, he announced, as though the hovel were the Palace of Versailles.

Up two flights in the otherwise empty house there was a room with a black door. He pressed me to it. It was locked. "See," he invited, “she's inside."

"It's locked," I replied. My heart was fit to burst: she was near, for certain, I knew she was near. "See," he said again, and pointed to a tiny hole in the panel of the door. I devoured the light through it, pushing my eye towards her through the tiny hole.

The squalid interior was empty, except for a mattress and Jacqueline. She lay spread-eagled, her wrists and ankles bound to rough posts set in the bare floor at the four corners of the mattress.

"Who did this?" I demanded, not taking my eye from her nakedness.

"She asks," he replied. "It is her desire. She asks." She had heard my voice; she cranked up her head with some difficulty and stared directly at the door. When she looked at me all the hairs rose on my head, I swear it, in welcome, and swayed at her command.

"Oliver," she said.

"Jacqueline." I pressed the word to the wood with a kiss.

Her body was seething, her shaved sex opening and closing like some exquisite plant, purple and lilac and rose. "Let me in," I said to Koos.

"You will not survive one night with her."

"Let me in."

"She is expensive," he warned.

"How much do you want?"

"Everything you have. The shirt off your back, your money, your jewellery; then she is yours." I wanted to beat the door down, or break

his nicotine stained fingers one by one until he gave me the key. He knew what I was thinking.

"The key is hidden," he said, "And the door is strong. You must pay, Mr. Vassi. You want to pay." It was true. I wanted to pay.

"You want to give me all you have ever owned, all you have ever been. You want to go to her with nothing to claim you back. I know this. It's how they all go to her."

"All? Are there many?"

"She is insatiable," he said, without relish. It wasn't a pimp's boast: it was his pain, I saw that clearly. "I am always finding more for her, and burying them."

Burying them.

That, I suppose, is Koos' function; he disposes of the dead. And he will get his lacquered hands on me after tonight; he will fetch me off her when I am dry and useless to her, and find some pit, some canal, some furnace to lose me in. The thought isn't particularly attractive.

Yet here I am with all the money I could raise from selling my few remaining possessions on the table in front of me, my dignity gone, my life hanging on a thread, waiting for a pimp and a key.

It's well dark now, and he's late. But I think he is obliged to come. Not for the money, he probably has few requirements beyond his heroin and his mascara. He will come to do business with me because she demands it and he is in thrall to her, every bit as much as I am. Oh, he will come. Of course he will come.

Well, I think that is sufficient.

This is my testimony. I have no time to re-read it now. His footsteps are on the stairs (he limps) and I must go with him. This I leave to whoever finds it, to use as they think fit. By morning I shall be dead, and happy. Believe it."

My God, she thought, Koos has cheated me.

Vassi had been outside the door, she'd felt his flesh with her mind and she'd embraced it. But Koos hadn't let him in, despite her explicit orders. Of all men, Vassi was to be allowed free access, Koos knew that. But he'd cheated her, the way they'd all cheated her except Vassi.

With him (perhaps) it had been love.

She lay on the bed through the night, never sleeping. She seldom slept now for more than a few minutes: and only then with Koos watching her. She'd done herself harm in her sleep, mutilating herself without knowing it, waking up bleeding and screaming with every limb sprouting needles she'd made out of her own skin and muscle, like a flesh cactus.

It was dark again, she guessed, but it was difficult to be sure. In this heavily curtained, bare-bulb lit room, it was a perpetual day to the senses, perpetual night to the soul. She would lie, bed-sores on her back, on her buttocks, listening to the far sounds of the street, sometimes dozing for a while, sometimes eating from Koos' hand, being washed, being toileted, being used.

A key turned in the lock. She strained from the mattress to see who it was. The door was opening… opening… opened.

Vassi. Oh God, it was Vassi at last, she could see him crossing the room towards her.

Let this not be another memory, she prayed, please let it be him this time: true and real.

"Jacqueline."

He said the name of her flesh, the whole name.

"Jacqueline." It was him.

Behind him, Koos stared between her legs, fascinated by the dance of her labia.

"Koo…" she said, trying to smile.

"I brought him," he grinned at her, not looking away from her sex.

"A day," she whispered. "I waited a day, Koos. You made me wait -"

"What's a day to you?" he said, still grinning.

She didn't need the pimp any longer, not that he knew that. In his innocence he thought Vassi was just another man she'd seduced along the way; to be drained and discarded like the others. Koos believed he would be needed tomorrow; that's why he played this fatal game so artlessly.

"Lock the door," she suggested to him. "Stay if you like."

"Stay?" he said, leering. "You mean, and watch?"

He watched anyway. She knew he watched through that hole he had bored in the door; she could hear him pant sometimes. But this time, let him stay forever.

Carefully, he took the key from the outside of the door, closed it, slipped the key into the inside and locked it. Even as the lock clicked she killed him, before he could even turn round and look at her again. Nothing spectacular in the execution; she just reached into his pigeon chest and crushed his lungs. He slumped against the door and slid down, smearing his face across the wood.

Vassi didn't even turn round to see him die; she was all he ever wanted to look at again.

He approached the mattress, crouched, and began to untie her ankles. The skin was chafed, the rope scabby with old blood. He worked at the knots systematically, finding a calm he thought he'd lost, a simple contentment in being here at the end, unable to go back, and knowing that the path ahead was deep in her.

When her ankles were free, he began on her wrists, interrupting her view of the ceiling as he bent over her. His voice was soft.

"Why did you let him do this to you?"

"I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"To move; even to live. Every day, agony."

"Yes."

He understood so well that total incapacity to exist.

She felt him at her side, undressing, then laying a kiss on the sallow skin of the stomach of the body she occupied. It was marked with her workings; the skin had been stretched beyond its tolerance and was permanently criss-crossed. He lay down beside her, and the feel of his body against hers was not unpleasant.

She touched his head. Her joints were stiff, the movements painful, but she wanted to draw his face up to hers. He came, smiling, into her

sight, and they exchanged kisses.

My God, she thought, we are together.

And thinking they were together, her will was made flesh. Under his lips her features dissolved, becoming the red sea he'd dreamt of, and washing up over his face, that was itself dissolving; common waters made of thought and bone.

Her keen breasts pricked him like arrows; his erection, sharpened by her thought, killed her in return with his only thrust. Tangled in a wash of love they thought themselves extinguished, and were.

Outside, the hard world mourned on, the chatter of buyers and sellers continuing through the night. Eventually indifference and fatigue claimed even the eagerest merchant. Inside and out there was a healing silence: an end to losses and to gains.

X: THE SKINS OF THE FATHERS

The car coughed, and choked, and died. Davidson was suddenly aware of the wind on the desert road, as it keened at the windows of his Mustang. He tried to revive the engine, but it refused life. Exasperated, Davidson let his sweating hands drop off the wheel and surveyed the territory. In every direction, hot air, hot rock, hot sand. This was Arizona.

He opened the door and stepped out on to the baking dust highway. In front and behind it stretched unswervingly to the pale horizon. If he narrowed his eyes he could just make out the mountains, but as soon as he attempted to fix his focus they were eaten up by the heat-haze. Already the sun was corroding the top of his head, where his blond hair was thinning. He threw up the hood of the car and peered hopelessly into the engine, regretting his lack of mechanical know-how. Jesus, he thought, why don't they make the damn things foolproof? Then he heard the music. It was so far off it sounded like a whistling in his ears at first: but it became louder.

It was music, of a sort.

How did it sound? Like the wind through telephone lines, a sourceless, rhythmless, heartless air-wave plucking at the hairs on the back of his neck and telling them to stand. He tried to ignore it, but it wouldn't go away. He looked up out of the shade of the bonnet to find the players, but the road was empty in both directions. Only as he scanned the desert to the south-east did a line of tiny figures become visible to him, walking, or skipping, or dancing at the furthest edge of his sight, liquid in the heat of the earth. The procession, if that was its nature, was long, and making its way across the desert parallel to the highway. Their paths would not cross.

Davidson glanced down once more into the cooling entrails of his vehicle and then up again at the distant line of dancers.

He needed help: no doubt of it.

He started off across the desert towards them.

Once off the highway the dust, not impacted by the passage of cars, was loose: it flung itself up at his face with every step. Progress was slow: he broke into a trot: but they were receding from him. He began to run.

Over the thunder of his blood, he could hear the music more loudly now. There was no melody apparent, but a constant rising and falling of many instruments; howls and hummings, whistlings, drummings and roarings. The head of the procession had now disappeared, received into distance, but the celebrants (if that they were) still paraded past. He changed direction a little, to head them off, glancing over his shoulder briefly to check his way back. With a stomach-churning sense of loneliness he saw his vehicle, as small as a beetle on the road behind him, sitting weighed down by a boiling sky.

He ran on. A quarter of an hour, perhaps, and he began to see the procession more clearly, though its leaders were well out of sight. It was, he began to believe, a carnival of some sort, extraordinary as that seemed out here in the middle of God's nowhere. The last dancers in the parade were definitely costumed, however. They wore headdresses and masks that tottered well above human height – there was the flutter of brightly-coloured feathers, and streamers coiling in the air behind them. Whatever the reason for the celebration they reeled like drunkards, loping one moment, leaping the next, squirming, some of them, on the ground, bellies to the hot sand.

Davidson's lungs were torn with exhaustion, and it was clear he was losing the pursuit. Having gained on the procession, it was now moving off faster than he had strength or willpower to follow.

He stopped, bracing his arms on his knees to support his aching torso, and looked under his sweat-sodden brow at his disappearing salvation. Then, summoning up all the energy he could muster, he yelled: Stop!

At first there was no response. Then, through the slits of his eyes, he thought he saw one or two of the revelers halt. He straightened up. Yes, one or two were looking at him. He felt, rather than saw, their eyes upon him. He began to walk towards them.

So me of the instruments had died away, as though word of his presence was spreading among them. They'd definitely seen him, no doubt of that.

He walked on, faster now, and out of the haze, the details of the procession began to come clear. His pace slowed a little. His heart, already pounding with exertion, thudded in his chest.

–My Jesus, he said, and for the first time in his thirty-six godless years the words were a true prayer. He stood off half a mile from

them, but there was no mistaking what he saw. His aching eyes knew papier-mвchй from flesh, illusion from misshapen reality.

The creatures at the end of the procession, the least of the least, the hangers-on, were monsters whose appearance beggared the nightmares of insanity.

One was perhaps eighteen or twenty feet tall. Its skin, that hung in folds on its muscle, was a sheath of spikes, its head a cone of exposed teeth, set in scarlet gums. Another was three-winged, its triple ended tail thrashing the dust with reptilian enthusiasm. A third and fourth were married together in a union of monstrosities the result of which was more disgusting than the sum of its parts. Through its length and breadth this symbiotic horror was locked in seeping marriage, its limbs thrust in and through wounds in its partner's flesh. Though the tongues of its heads were wound together it managed a cacophonous howl.

Davidson took a step back, and glanced round at the car and the highway. As he did so one of the things, black and red, began to scream like a whistle. Even at a half mile's distance the noise cut into Davidson's head. He looked back at the procession.

The whistling monster had left its place in the parade, and its clawed feet were pounding the desert as it began to race towards him. Uncontrollable panic swept through Davidson, and he felt his trousers fill as his bowels failed him.

The thing was rushing towards him with the speed of a cheetah, growing with every second, so he could see more detail of its alien anatomy with every step. The thumbless hands with their toothed palms, the head that bore only a tri-coloured eye, the sinew of its shoulder and chest, even its genitals, erect with anger, or (God help me) lust, two pronged and beating against its abdomen.

Davidson shrieked a shriek that was almost the equal of the monster's noise, and fled back the way he had come. The car was a mile, two miles away, and he knew it offered no protection were he to reach it before the monster overcame him. In that moment he realized how close death was, how close it had always been, and he longed for a moment's comprehension of this idiot honor.

It was already close behind him as his shit-slimed legs buckled, and he fell, and crawled, and dragged himself towards the car. As he heard the thud of its feet at his back he instinctively huddled into a ball of

whimpering flesh, and awaited the coup de grace.

He waited two heart-beats.

Three. Four. Still it didn't come.

The whistling voice had grown to an unbearable pitch, and was now fading a little. The gnashing palms did not connect with his body. Cautiously, expecting his head to be snapped from his neck at any moment, he peered through his fingers.

The creature had overtaken him.

Perhaps contemptuous of his frailty it had run on past him towards the highway.

Davidson smelt his excrement, and his fear. He felt curiously ignored. Behind him the parade had moved on. Only one or two inquisitive monsters still looked over theft shoulders in his direction, as they receded into the dust.

The whistling now changed pitch. Davidson cautiously raised his head from ground level. The noise was all but outside his hearing-range, just a shrill whine at the back of his aching head.

He stood up.

The creature had leapt on to the top of his car. Its head was thrown back in a kind of ecstasy, its erection plainer than ever, the eye in its huge head glinting. With a final swoop to its voice, which took the whistle out of human hearing, it bent upon the car, smashing the windshield and curling its mouthed hands upon the roof. It then proceeded to tear the steel back like so much paper, its body twitching with glee, its head jerking about. Once the roof was torn up, it leapt on to the highway and threw the metal into the air. It turned in the sky and smashed down on the desert floor. Davidson briefly wondered what he could possibly put on the insurance form. Now the creature was tearing the vehicle apart. The doors were scattered. The engine was ripped out. The wheels slashed and wrenched off the axles. To Davidson's nostrils there drifted the unmistakable stench of gasoline. No sooner had he registered the smell than a shard of metal glanced against another and the creature and the car were sheathed in a billowing column of fire, blackening into smoke as it balled over the highway.

The thing did not call out: or if it did its agonies were beyond

hearing. It staggered out of the inferno with its flesh on fire, every inch of its body alight; its arms flailed wildly in a vain attempt to douse the fire, and it began to run off down the highway, fleeing from the source of its agony towards the mountains. Flames sprouted off its back and the air was tinged with the smell of its cooking flesh.

It didn't fall, however, though the fire must have been devouring it. The run went on and on, until the heat dissolved the highway into the blue distance, and it was gone.

Davidson sank down on to his knees. The shit on his legs was already dry in the heat. The car continued to burn. The music had gone entirely, as had the procession.

It was the sun that drove him from the sand back towards his gutted car.

He was blank-eyed when the next vehicle along the highway stopped to pick him up.

Sheriff Josh Packard stared in disbelief at the claw prints on the ground at his feet. They were etched in slowly solidifying fat, the liquid flesh of the monster that had run through the main street (the only street) of Welcome minutes ago. It had then collapsed, breathing its last breath, and died in a writhing ball three trucks' length from the bank. The normal business of Welcome, the trading, the debating, the how do you do's, had halted. One or two nauseous individuals had been received into the lobby of the Hotel while the smell of fricasseed flesh thickened the good desert air of the town.

The stench was something between over-cooked fish and an exhumation, and it offended Packard. This was his town, overlooked by him, protected by him. The intrusion of this fireball was not looked upon kindly. Packard took out his gun and began to walk towards the corpse. The flames were all but out now, having eaten the best of their meal. Even so destroyed by fire, it was a sizeable bulk. What might once have been its limbs were gathered around what might have been its head. The rest was beyond recognition. All in all, Packard was glad of that small mercy. But even in the charnel-house confusion of rendered flesh and blackened bone he could make out enough inhuman forms to quicken his pulse.

This was a monster: no doubt of it.

A creature from earth: out of earth, indeed. Up from the underworld and on its way to the great bowl for a night of celebration. Once every

generation or so, his father had told him, the desert spat out its demons and let them loose awhile. Being a child who thought for himself Packard had never believed the shit his father talked but was this not such a demon?

Whatever mischance had brought this burning monstrosity into his town to die, there was pleasure for Packard in the proof of their vulnerability. His father had never mentioned that possibility.

Half-smiling at the thought of mastering such foulness, Packard stepped up to the smoking corpse and kicked it. The crowd, still lingering in the safety of the doorways, cooed with admiration at his bravery. The half-smile spread across his face. That kick alone would be worth a night of drinks, perhaps even a woman.

The thing was belly up. With the dispassionate gaze of a professional demon-kicker, Packard scrutinized the tangle of limbs across the head. It was quite dead, that was obvious. He sheathed his gun and bent towards the corpse. "Get a camera out here, Jebediah," he said, impressing even himself.

His deputy ran off towards the office.

"What we need," he said, “is a picture of this here beauty."

Packard went down on his haunches and reached across to the blackened limbs of the thing. His gloves would be ruined, but it was worth the inconvenience for the good this gesture would be doing for his public image. He could almost feel the admiring looks as he touched the flesh, and began to shake a limb loose from the head of the monster. The fire had welded the parts together, and he had to wrench the limb free. But it came, with a jellied sound, revealing the heat-withered eye on the face beneath.

He dropped the limb back where it had come with a look of disgust.

A beat.

Then the demon's arm was snaking up – suddenly – too suddenly for Packard to move, and in a moment sublime with terror the Sheriff saw the mouth open in the palm of its forefoot and close again around his own hand. Whimpering he lost balance and sat in the fat, pulling away from the mouth, as his glove was chewed through, and the teeth connected with his hand, clipping off his fingers as the rasping maw drew digits, blood and stumps further into its gut.

Packard's bottom slid in the mess under him and he squirmed, howling now, to loose himself. It still had life in it, this thing from the underworld. Packard bellowed for mercy as he staggered to his feet, dragging the sordid bulk of the thing up off the ground as he did so.

A shot sounded, close to Packard's ear. Fluids, blood and pus spattered him as the limb was blown to smithereens at the shoulder, and the mouth loosed its grip on Packard. The wasted mass of devouring muscle fell to the ground, and Packard's hand, or what was left of it, was in the open air again. There were no fingers remaining on his right hand, and barely half a thumb; the shattered bone of his digits jutted awkwardly from a partially chewed palm.

Eleanor Kooker dropped the barrel of the shotgun she had just fired, and grunted with satisfaction. "Your hand's gone," she said, with brutal simplicity.

Monsters, Packard remembered his father telling him, never die. He'd remembered too late, and now he'd sacrificed his hand, his drinking, sexing hand. A wave of nostalgia for lost years with those fingers washed over him, while dots burst into darkness before his eyes. The last thing he saw as a dead faint carried him to the ground was his dutiful deputy raising a camera to record the whole scene.

The shack at the back of the house was Lucy's refuge and always had been. When Eugene came back drunk from Welcome, or a sudden fury took him because the stew was cold, Lucy retired into the shack where she could weep in peace. There was no pity to be had in Lucy's life. None from Eugene certainly, and precious little time to pity herself.

Today, the old source of irritation had got Eugene into a rage: The child.

The nurtured and carefully cultivated child of their love; named after the brother of Moses, Aaron, which meant 'exalted one'. A sweet boy. The prettiest boy in the whole territory; five years old and already as charming and polite as any East Coast Momma could wish to raise.

Aaron.

Lucy's pride and joy, a child fit to blow bubbles in a picture book, fit to dance, fit to charm the Devil himself. That was Eugene's objection.

"That flicking child's no more a boy than you are," he said to Lucy.

"He's not even a half-boy. He's only fit for putting in fancy shoes and selling perfume. Or a preacher, he's fit for a preacher."

He pointed a nail-bitten, crook-thumbed hand at the boy.

"You're a shame to your father."

Aaron met his father's stare.

"You hear me, boy?"

Eugene looked away. The boy's big eyes made him sick to his stomach, more like a dog's eyes than anything human. "I want him out of this house."

"What's he done?"

"He doesn't need to do a thing. It's sufficient he's the way he is. They laugh at me, you know that? They laugh at me because of him."

"Nobody laughs at you, Eugene."

"Oh yes -"

"Not for the boy's sake."

"Huh?"

"If they laugh, they don't laugh at the boy. They laugh at you."

"Shut your mouth."

"They know what you are, Eugene. They see you clear, clear as I see you."

"I tell you, woman -"

"Sick as a dog in the street, talking about what you've seen and what you're scared of-"

He struck her as he had many times before. The blow drew blood, as similar blows had for five years, but though she reeled, her first thoughts were for the boy.

"Aaron," she said through the tears the pain had brought. "Come with me."

"You let the bastard alone." Eugene was trembling.

"Aaron."

The child stood between father and mother, not knowing which to obey. The look of confusion on his face brought Lucy's tears more copiously.

"Mama," said the child, very quietly. There was a grave look in his eyes, that went beyond confusion. Before Lucy could find a way to cool the situation, Eugene had hold of the boy by his hair and was dragging him closer. "You listen to your father, boy."

"Yes -"

"Yes, sir, we say to our father, don't we? We say, yes, sir."

Aaron's face was thrust into the stinking crotch of his father's jeans.

"Yes, sir."

"He stays with me, woman. You're not taking him out into that fucking shack one more time. He stays with his father."

The skirmish was lost and Lucy knew it. If she pressed the point any further, she only put the child at further risk. "If you harm him -"

"I'm his father, woman," Eugene grinned. "What, do you think I'd hurt my own flesh and blood?" The boy was locked to his father's hips in a position that was scarcely short of obscene. But Lucy knew her husband: and he was dose to an outburst that would be uncontrollable. She no longer cared for herself- she'd had her joys – but the boy was so vulnerable.

"Get out of our sight, woman, why don't you? The boy and I want to be alone, don't we?"

Eugene dragged Aaron's face from his crotch and sneered down at his pale face.

"Don't we?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Yes, Papa. Oh yes indeed, Papa."

Lucy left the house and retired into the cool darkness of the shack,

where she prayed for Aaron, named after the brother of Moses. Aaron, whose name meant 'exalted one'; she wondered how long he could survive the brutalities the future would provide.

The boy was stripped now. He stood white in front of his father. He wasn't afraid. The whipping that would be meted out to him would pain him, but this was not true fear.

"You're sickly, lad," said Eugene, running a huge hand over his son's abdomen. "Weak and sickly like a runty hog. If I was a farmer, and you were a hog, boy, you know what I'd do?"

Again, he took the boy by the hair. The other hand, between the legs.

"You know what I'd do, boy?"

"No, Papa. What would you do?"

The scored hand slid up over Aaron's body while his father made a slitting sound.

"Why, I'd cut you up and feed you to the rest of the litter. Nothing a hog likes better to eat, than hog-meat. How'd you like that?"

"No, Papa."

"You wouldn't like that?"

"No thank you, Papa."

Eugene's face hardened.

"Well I'd like to see that, Aaron. I'd like to see what you'd do if I was to open you up and have a look inside you." There was a new violence in his father's games, which Aaron couldn't understand: new threats, new intimacy. Uncomfortable as he was the boy knew the real fear was felt not by him but by his father; fear was Eugene's birthright, just as it was Aaron's to watch, and wait, and suffer, until the moment came. He knew (without understanding how or why), that he would be an instrument in the destruction of his father. Maybe more than an instrument.

Anger erupted in Eugene. He stared at the boy, his brown fists clenched so tight that the knuckles burned white. The boy was his ruin, somehow; he'd killed the good life they'd lived before he was

born, as surely as if he'd shot his parents dead. Scarcely thinking of what he was doing, Eugene's hands closed around the back of the boy's frail neck. Aaron made no sound.

"I could kill you boy."

"Yes, sir."

"What do you say to that?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You should say thank you, sir."

"Why?"

"Why, boy? "Cause this life's not worth what a hog can shit, and I'd be doing you a loving service, as a father should a son."

"Yes, sir."

In the shack behind the house Lucy had stopped crying. There was no purpose in it; and besides, something in the sky she could see through the holes in the roof had brought memories to her that wiped the tears away. A certain sky: pure blue, sheeny-clear. Eugene wouldn't harm the boy. He wouldn't dare, ever dare, harm that child. He knew what the boy was, though he'd never admit to it.

She remembered the day, six years ago now, when the sky had been sheened like today, and the air had been livid with the heat. Eugene and she had been just about as hot as the air, they hadn't taken their eyes off each other all day. He was stronger then: in his prime. A soaring, splendid man, his body made heavy with work, and his legs so hard they felt like rock when she ran her hands over them. She had been quite a looker herself; the best damn backside in Welcome, firm and downy; a divide so softly haired Eugene couldn't keep from kissing her, even there, in the secret place. He'd pleasure her all day and all night sometimes; in the house they were building, or out on the sand in the late afternoon. The desert made a fine bed, and they could lie uninterrupted beneath the wide sky. That day six years ago the sky had darkened too soon; long before night was due. It had seemed to blacken in a moment, and the lovers were suddenly cold in their hurried nakedness. She had seen, over his shoulder, the shapes the sky had taken: the vast and monumental creatures that were watching them. He, in his passion, still worked at her, thrust to his root and out the length again as he knew she delighted in 'til a hand

the colour of beets and the size of a man pinched his neck, and plucked him out of his wife's lap. She watched him lifted into the sky like a squirming jack-rabbit, spitting from two mouths, North and South, as he finished his thrusts on the air. Then his eyes opened for a moment, and he saw his wife twenty feet below him, still bare, still spread butterfly wide, with monsters on every side. Casually, without malice, they threw him away, out of their ring of admiration, and out of her sight.

She remembered so well the hour that followed, the embraces of the monsters. Not foul in any way, not gross or harmful, never less than loving. Even the machineries of reproduction that they pierced her with, one after the other, were not painful, though some were as large as Eugene's fisted arm, and hard as bone. How many of those strangers took her that afternoon – three, four, five? Mingling their semen in her body, fondly teasing joy from her with their patient thrusts. When they went away, and her skin was touched with sunlight again, she felt, though on reflection it seemed shameful, a loss; as though the zenith of her life was passed, and the rest of her days would be a cold ride down to death.

She had got up at last, and walked over to where Eugene was lying unconscious on the sand, one of his legs broken by the fall. She had kissed him, and then squatted to pass water. She hoped, and hope it was, that there would be fruit from the seed of that day's love, and it would be a keepsake of her joy.

In the house Eugene struck the boy. Aaron's nose bled, but he made no sound.

"Speak, boy."

"What shall I say?"

"Am I your father or not?"

"Yes, father."

"Liar!"

He struck again, without warning; this time the blow carried Aaron to the floor. As his small, uncalloused palms flattened against the kitchen tiles to raise himself he felt something through the floor. There was a music in the ground.

"Liar!" his father was saying still.

There would be more blows to come, the boy thought, more pain, more blood. But it was bearable; and the music was a promise, after a long wait, of an end to blows once and for all.

Davidson staggered into the main street of Welcome. It was the middle of the afternoon, he guessed (his watch had stopped, perhaps out of sympathy), but the town appeared to be empty, until his eye alighted on the dark, smoking mound in the middle of the street, a hundred yards from where he stood.

If such a thing had been possible, his blood would have run cold at the sight.

He recognized what that bundle of burned flesh had been, despite the distance, and his head spun with horror. It had all been real after all. He stumbled on a couple more steps, fighting the dizziness and losing, until he felt himself supported by strong arms, and heard, through a fuzz of head-noises, reassuring words being spoken to him. They made no sense, but at least they were soft and human: he could give up any pretence to consciousness. He fainted, but it seemed there was only a moment of respite before the world came back into view again, as odious as ever. He had been carried inside and was lying on an uncomfortable sofa, a woman's face, that of Eleanor Kooker, staring down at him. She beamed as he came round.

"The man'll survive," she said, her voice like cabbage going through a grater.

She leaned further forward.

"You seen the thing, did you?"

Davidson nodded.

"Better give us the low-down."

A glass was thrust into his hand and Eleanor filled it generously with whisky.

"Drink," she demanded, “then tell us what you got to tell -”

He downed the whisky in two, and the glass was immediately refilled. He drank the second glass more slowly, and began to feel better.

The room was filled with people: it was as though all of Welcome

was pressing into the Kooker front parlour. Quite an audience: but then it was quite a tale. Loosened by the whisky, he began to tell it as best he could, without embellishment, just letting the words com e. In return Eleanor described the circumstances of Sheriff Packard's 'accident' with the body of the car-wrecker. Packard was in the room, looking the worse for consoling whiskies and pain killers, his mutilated hand bound up so well it looked more like a club than a limb.

"It's not the only devil out there," said Packard when the stories were out.

"So's you say," said Eleanor, her quick eyes less than convinced.

"My Papa said so," Packard returned, staring down at his bandaged hand. "And I believe it, sure as Hell I believe it." "Then we'd best do something about it."

"Like what?" posed a sour looking individual leaning against the mantelpiece. "What's to be done about the likes of a thing that eats automobiles?"

Eleanor straightened up and delivered a well-aimed sneer at the questioner.

"Well let's have the benefit of your wisdom, Lou," she said. "What do you think we should do?" "I think we should lie low and let 'em pass."

"I'm no ostrich," said Eleanor, “but if you want to go bury your head, I'll lend you a spade, Lou. I'll even dig you the hole."

General laughter. The cynic, discomforted, fell silent and picked at his nails.

"We can't sit here and let them come running through," said Packard's deputy, between blowing bubbles with his gum.

"They were going towards the mountains," Davidson said. "Away from Welcome."

"So what's to stop them changing their goddam minds?" Eleanor countered. "Well?"

No answer. A few nods, a few head shakings. "Jebediah," she said, “you're deputy – what do you think about this?" The young man with the badge and the gum flushed a little, and plucked at his thin

moustache. He obviously hadn't a clue.

"I see the picture," the woman snapped back before he could answer. "Clear as a bell. You're all too shit scared to go poking them divils out of their holes, that it?"

Murmurs of self-justification around the room, more head-shaking.

"You're just planning to sit yourselves down and let the women folk be devoured."

A good word: devoured. So much more emotive than eaten. Eleanor paused for effect. Then she said darkly: "Or worse."

Worse than devoured? Pity sakes, what was worse than devoured?

"You're not going to be touched by no divils," said Packard, getting up from his seat with some difficulty. He swayed on his feet as he addressed the room.

"We're going to have them shit-eaters and lynch 'em." This rousing battle-cry left the males in the room unroused; the sheriff was low on credibility since his encounter in Main Street.

"Discretion's the better part of valour," Davidson murmured under his breath.

"That's so much horse-shit," said Eleanor.

Davidson shrugged, and finished off the whisky in his glass. It was not re-filled. He reflected ruefully that he should be thankful he was still alive. But his work-schedule was in ruins. He had to get to a telephone and hire a car; if necessary have someone drive out to pick him up. The 'divils', whatever they were, were not his problem. Perhaps he'd be interested to read a few column-inches on the subject in Newsweek, when he was back East and relaxing with Barbara; but now all he wanted to do was finish his business in Arizona and get home as soon as possible. Packard, however, had other ideas.

"You're a witness," he said, pointing at Davidson, “and as Sheriff of this community I order you to stay in Welcome until you've answered to my satisfaction all inquiries I have to put to you."

The formal language sounded odd from his slobbish mouth.

"I've got business -” Davidson began.

"Then you just send a cable and cancel that business, Mr. fancy-Davidson."

The man was scoring points off him, Davidson knew, bolstering his shattered reputation by taking pot-shots at the Easterner. Still, Packard was the law: there was nothing to be done about it. He nodded his assent with as much good grace as he could muster. There'd be time to lodge a formal complaint against this hick-town Mussolini when he was home, safe and sound. For now, better to send a cable, and let business go hang.

"So what's the plan?" Eleanor demanded of Packard.

The Sheriff puffed out his booze-brightened cheeks.

"We deal with the divils," he said.

"How?"

"Guns, woman."

"You'll need more than guns, if they're as big as he says they are -"

"They are -" said Davidson, "believe me, they are."

Packard sneered.

"We'll take the whole fucking arsenal," he said jerking his remaining thumb at Jebediah. "Go break out the heavy-duty weapons, boy. Anti-tank stuff. Bazookas."

General amazement.

"You got bazookas?" said Lou, the mantelpiece cynic.

Packard managed a leering smile.

"Military stuff," he said, "left over from the Big One." Davidson sighed inwardly. The man was a psychotic, with his own little arsenal of out-of-date weapons, which were probably more lethal to the user than to the victim. They were all going to die. God help him, they were all going to die.

"You may have lost your fingers," said Eleanor Kooker, delighted by this show of bravado, "but you're the only man in this room, Josh Packard."

Packard beamed and rubbed his crotch absent mindedly. Davidson couldn't take the atmosphere of hand-me-down machismo in the room any longer.

"Look," he piped up, "I've told you all I know. Why don't I just let you folks get on with it."

"You ain't leaving," said Packard, “if that's what you're rooting after."

"I'm just saying -”

"We know what you're saying son, and I ain't listening. If I see you hitch up your britches to leave I'll string you up by your balls. If you've got any."

The bastard would try it too, thought Davidson, even if he only had one hand to do it with. Just go with the flow, he told himself, trying to stop his lip curling. If Packard went out to find the monsters and his damn bazooka backfired, that was his business. Let it be.

"There's a whole tribe of them," Lou was quietly pointing out. "According to this man. So how do we take out so many of them?"

"Strategy," said Packard.

"We don't know their positions."

"Surveillance," replied Packard.

"They could really fuck us up Sheriff," Jebediah observed, picking a collapsed gum-bubble from his moustache. "This is our territory," said Eleanor. "We got it: we keep it."

Jebediah nodded.

"Yes, ma," he said.

"Suppose they just disappeared? Suppose we can't find them no more?" Lou was arguing. "Couldn't we just let 'em go to ground?"

"Sure," said Packard. "And then we're left waiting around for them to come out again and devour the women folk." "Maybe they mean no harm -” Lou replied.

Packard's reply was to raise his bandaged hand.

"They done me harm."

That was incontestable.

Packard continued, his voice hoarse with feeling.

"Shit, I want them come-bags so bad I'm going out there with or without help. But we've got to out-think them, out maneuver them, so we don't get anybody hurt."

The man talks some sense, thought Davidson. Indeed, the whole room seemed impressed. Murmurs of approval all round; even from the mantelpiece.

Packard rounded on the deputy again.

"You get your ass moving, son. I want you to call up that bastard Crumb out of Caution and get his boys down here with every goddam gun and grenade they've got. And if he asks what for you tell him Sheriff Packard's declaring a State of Emergency, and I'm requisitioning every asshole weapon in fifty miles, and the man on the other end of it. Move it, son."

Now the room was positively glowing with admiration, and Packard knew it.

"We'll blow the fuckers apart," he said.

For a moment the rhetoric seemed to work its magic on Davidson, and he half-believed it might be possible; then he remembered the details of the procession, tails, teeth and all, and his bravado sank without trace.

They came up to the house so quietly, not intending to creep, just so gentle with their tread nobody heard them. Inside, Eugene's anger had subsided. He was sitting with his legs up on the table, an empty bottle of whisky in front of him. The silence in the room was so heavy it suffocated.

Aaron, his face puffed up with his father's blows, was sitting beside the window. He didn't need to look up to see them coming across the sand towards the house, their approach sounded in his veins. His bruised face wanted to light up with a smile of welcome, but he repressed the instinct and simply waited, slumped in beaten resignation, until they were almost upon the house. Only when their massive bodies blocked out the sunlight through the window did he

stand up. The boy's movement woke Eugene from his trance.

"What is it, boy?"

The child had backed off from the window, and was standing in the middle of the room, sobbing quietly with anticipation. His tiny hands were spread like sun-rays, his fingers jittering and twitching in his excitement. "What's wrong with the window, boy?"

Aaron heard one of his true father's voices eclipse Eugene's mumblings. Like a dog eager to greet his master after a long separation, the boy ran to the door and tried to claw it open. It was locked and bolted.

"What's that noise, boy?"

Eugene pushed his son aside and fumbled with the key in the lock, while Aaron's father called to his child through the door. His voice sounded like a rush of water, counter pointed by soft, piping sighs. It was an eager voice, a loving voice.

All at once, Eugene seemed to understand. He took hold of the boy's hair and hauled him away from the door. Aaron squealed with pain.

"Papa!" he yelled.

Eugene took the cry as addressed to himself, but Aaron's true father also heard the boy's voice. His answering call was threaded with piercing notes of concern.

Outside the house Lucy had heard the exchange of voices. She came out of the protection of her shack, knowing what she'd see against that sheening sky, but no less dizzied by the monumental creatures that had gathered on every side of the house. An anguish went through her, remembering the lost joys of that day six years previous. They were all there, the unforgettable creatures, an incredible selection of forms -Pyramidal heads on rose coloured, classically proportioned torsos, that umbrellaed into shifting skirts of lace flesh. A headless silver beauty whose six mother of pearl arms sprouted in a circle from around its purring, pulsating mouth. A creature like a ripple on a fast-running stream, constant but moving, giving out a sweet and even tone. Creatures too fantastic to be real, too real to be disbelieved; angels of the hearth and threshold. One had a head, moving back and forth on a gossamer neck, like some preposterous weather-vane, blue as the early night sky and shot with a dozen eyes like so many suns. Another father, with a body like a fan, opening and closing in his

excitement, his orange flesh flushing deeper as the boy's voice was heard again.

"Papa!"

At the door of the house stood the creature Lucy remembered with greatest affection; the one who had first touched her, first soothed her fears, first entered her, infinitely gentle. It was perhaps twenty feet tall when standing at its full height. Now it was bowed towards the door, its mighty, hairless head, like that of a bird painted by a schizophrenic, bent close to the house as it spoke to the child. It was naked, and its broad, dark back sweated as it crouched. Inside the house, Eugene drew the boy close to him, as a shield.

"What do you know, boy?"

"Papa?"

"I said what do you know?"

"Papa!"

Jubilation was in Aaron's voice. The waiting was over.

The front of the house was smashed inwards. A limb like a flesh hook curled under the lintel and hauled the door from its hinges. Bricks flew up and showered down again; wood-splinters and dust filled the air. Where there had once been safe darkness, cataracts of sunlight now poured onto the dwarfed human figures in the ruins.

Eugene peered up through the veil of dust. The roof was being peeled back by giant hands, and there was sky where there had been beams. Towering on every side he saw the limbs, bodies and faces of impossible beasts. They were teasing the remaining walls down, destroying his house as casually as he would break a bottle. He let the boy slip from his grasp without realizing what he'd done.

Aaron ran towards the creature on the threshold.

"Papa!"

It scooped him up like a father meeting a child out of school, and its head was thrown back in a wave of ecstasy. A long, indescribable noise of joy was uttered out of its length and breadth. The hymn was taken up by the other creatures, mounting in celebration. Eugene covered his ears and fell to his knees. His nose had begun to bleed at

the first notes of the monster's music, and his eyes were full of stinging tears. He wasn't frightened. He knew they were not capable of doing him harm. He cried because he had ignored this eventuality for six years, and now, with their mystery and their glory in front of him, he sobbed not to have had the courage to face them and know them. Now it was too late. They'd taken the boy by force, and reduced his house, and his life, to ruins. Indifferent to his agonies, they were leaving, singing their jubilation, his boy in their arms forever.

In the township of Welcome organization was the by-word of the day. Davidson could only watch with admiration the way these foolish, hardy people were attempting to confront impossible odds. He was strangely enervated by the spectacle; like watching settlers, in some movie, preparing to muster paltry weaponry and simple faith to meet the pagan violence of the savage. But, unlike the movie, Davidson knew defeat was pre-ordained. He'd seen these monsters: awe-inspiring. Whatever the rightness of the cause, the purity of the faith, the savages trampled the settlers underfoot fairly often. The defeats just make it into the movies.

Eugene's nose ceased to bleed after half an hour or so, but he didn't notice. He was dragging, pulling, cajoling Lucy towards Welcome. He wanted to hear no explanations from the slut, even though her voice was babbling ceaselessly. He could only hear the sound of the monsters' churning tones, and Aaron's repeated call of "Papa', that was answered by a house-wrecking limb.

Eugene knew he had been conspired against, though even in his most tortured imaginings he could not grasp the whole truth.

Aaron was mad, he knew that much. And somehow his wife, his ripe-bodied Lucy, who had been such a beauty and such a comfort, was instrumental in both the boy's insanity and his own grief.

She'd sold the boy: that was his half-formed belief. In some unspeakable way she had bargained with these things from the underworld, and had exchanged the life and sanity of his only son for some kind of gift. What had she gained, for this payment? Some trinket or other that she kept buried in her shack? My God, she would suffer for it. But before he made her suffer, before he wrenched her hair from its holes, and tarred her flashing breasts with pitch, she would confess. He'd make her confess; not to him but to the people of Welcome – the men and women who scoffed at his drunken ramblings, laughed when he wept into his beer. They would hear, from Lucy's own lips, the truth behind the nightmares he had endured,

and learn, to their horror, that demons he talked about were real. Then he would be exonerated, utterly, and the town would take him back into its bosom asking for his forgiveness, while the feathered body of his bitch-wife swung from a telephone pole outside the town's limits.

They were two miles outside Welcome when Eugene stopped.

"Something's coming."

A cloud of dust, and at its swirling heart a multitude of burning eyes.

He feared the worst.

"My Christ!"

He loosed his wife. Were they coming to fetch her to o? Yes, that was probably another part of the bargain she'd made.

"They've taken the town," he said. The air was full of their voices; it was too much to bear.

They were coming at him down the road in a whining horde, driving straight at him – Eugene turned to run, letting the slut go. They could have her, as long as they left him alone; Lucy was smiling into the dust. "It's Packard," she said.

Eugene glanced back along the road and narrowed his eyes. The cloud of divils was resolving itself. The eyes at its heart were headlights, the voices were sirens; there was an army of cars and motorcycles, led by Packard's howling vehicle, careering down the road from Welcome.

Eugene was confounded. What was this, a mass exodus? Lucy, for the first time that glorious day, felt a twinge of doubt.

As it approached, the convoy slowed, and came to a halt; the dust settled, revealing the extent of Packard's kamikaze squad. There were about a dozen cars and half a dozen bikes, all of them loaded with police and weapons. A smattering of Welcome citizens made up the army, among them Eleanor Kooker. An impressive array of mean minded, well-armed people.

Packard leant out of his car, spat, and spoke.

"Got problems, Eugene?" he asked.

"I'm no fool, Packard," said Eugene.

"Not saying you are."

"I seen these things. Lucy'll tell you."

"I know you have, Eugene; I know you have. There's no denying that there's divils in them hills, sure as shit. What'd you think I've got this posse together for, if it ain't divils?"

Packard grinned across to Jebediah at the wheel. "Sure as shit," he said again. "We're going to blow them all to Kingdom Come."

From the back of the car, Miss Kooker leaned out the window; she was smoking a cigar.

"Seems we owe you an apology, Gene," she said, offering an apology for a smile. He's still a sot, she thought; marrying that fat-bottomed whore was the death of him. What a waste of a man.

Eugene's face tightened with satisfaction.

"Seems you do."

"Get in one of them cars behind," said Packard, “you and Lucy both; and we'll fetch them out of their holes like snakes -”

"They've gone towards the hills," said Eugene.

"That so?"

"Took my boy. Threw my house down."

"Many of them?"

"Dozen or so."

"OK Eugene, you'd best get in with us." Packard ordered a cop out of the back. "You're going to be hot for them bastards, eh?"

Eugene turned to where Lucy had been standing.

"And I want her tried -” he said.

But Lucy was gone, running off across the desert: doll-sized already.

"She's headed off the road," said Eleanor. "She'll kill herself."

"Killing's too good for her," said Eugene, as he climbed into the car. "That woman's meaner than the Devil himself." "How's that, Gene?"

"Sold my only son to Hell, that woman -"Lucy was erased by the heat-haze.

"- to Hell."

"Then let her be," said Packard. "Hell'll take her back, sooner or later."

Lucy had known they wouldn't bother to follow her. From the moment she'd seen the car lights in the dust-cloud, seen the guns, and the helmets, she knew she had little place in the events ahead. At best, she would be a spectator. At worst, she'd die of heatstroke crossing the desert, and never know the upshot of the oncoming battle. She'd often mused about the existence of the creatures who were collectively Aaron's father. Where they lived, why they'd chosen, in their wisdom, to make love to her. She'd wondered also whether anyone else in Welcome had knowledge of them. How many human eyes, other than her own, had snatched glimpses of their secret anatomies, down the passage of years? And of course she'd wondered if there would one day come a reckoning time, a confrontation between one species and the other. Now it seemed to be here, without warning, and against the background of such a reckoning her life was as nothing.

Once the cars and bikes had disappeared out of sight, she doubled back, tracing her footmarks in the sand 'til she met the road again. There was no way of regaining Aaron, she realized that. She had, in a sense, merely been a guardian of the child, though she'd borne him. He belonged, in some strange way, to the creatures that had married their seeds in her body to make him. Maybe she'd been a vessel for some experiment in fertility, and now the doctors had returned to examine the resulting child. Maybe they had simply taken him out of love. Whatever the reasons she only hoped she would see the outcome of the battle. Deep in her, in a place touched only by monsters, she hoped for their victory, even though many of the species she called her own would perish as a result.

In the foothills there hung a great silence. Aaron had been set down amongst the rocks, and they gathered around him eagerly to examine his clothes, his hair, his eyes, his smile.

It was towards evening, but Aaron didn't feel cold. The breaths of

his fathers were warm, and smelt, he thought, like the interior of the General Supplies Emporium in Welcome, a mingling of toffee and hemp, fresh cheese and iron. His skin was tawny in the light of the diminishing sun, and at his zenith stars were appearing. He was not happier at his mother's nipple than in that ring of demons.

At the toe of the foothills Packard brought the convoy to a halt. Had he known who Napoleon Bonaparte was, no doubt he would have felt like that conqueror. Had he known that conqueror's life-story, he might have sensed that this was his Waterloo: but Josh Packard lived and died bereft of heroes.

He summoned his men from their cars and went amongst them, his mutilated hand tucked in his shirt for support. It was not the most encouraging parade in military history. There were more than a few white and sickly-pale faces amongst his soldiers, more than a few eyes that avoided his stare as he gave his orders.

"Men," he bawled.

(It occurred to both Kooker and Davidson that as sneak-attacks went this would not be amongst the quietest.) "Men – we've arrived, we're organized, and we've got God on our side. We've got the best of the brutes already, understand?"

Silence; baleful looks; more sweat.

"I don't want to see one jack man of you turn your heel and run, “cause if you do and I set my eyes on you, you'll crawl home with your backside shot to Hell!"

Eleanor thought of applauding; but the speech wasn't over.

"And remember, men," here Packard's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, “these divils took Eugene's boy Aaron not four hours past. Took him fairly off his m other's tit, while she was rocking him to sleep. They ain't nothing but savages, whatever they may look like. They don't give a mind to a mother, or a child, or nothing. So when you get up close to one you just think how you'd have felt if you'd been taken from your mother's tit-” -” He liked the phrase 'mother's tit'. It said so much, so simply. Momma's tit had a good deal more power to move these men than her apple pie.

"You've nothing to fear but seeming less than men, men."

Good line to finish on.

"Get on with it."

He got back into the car. Someone down the line began to applaud, and the clapping was taken up by the rest of them. Packard's wide red face was cleft with a hard, yellow smile.

"Wagons roll!" he grinned, and the convoy moved off into the hills.

Aaron felt the air change. It wasn't that he was cold: the breaths that warmed him remained as embracing as ever. But there was nevertheless an alteration in the atmosphere: some kind of intrusion. Fascinated, he watched his fathers respond to the change: their substance glinting with new colours, graver, warier colours. One or two even lifted their heads as if to sniff the air.

Something was wrong. Something, someone, was coming to interfere with this night of festival, unplanned and uninvited. The demons knew the signs and they were not unprepared for the eventuality. Was it not inevitable that the heroes of Welcome would come after the boy? Didn't the men believe, in their pitiable way, that their species was born out of earth's necessity to know itself, nurtured from mammal to mammal until it blossomed as humanity? Natural then to treat the fathers as the enemy, to root them out and try to destroy them. A tragedy really: when the only thought the fathers had was of unity through marriage, that their children should blunder in and spoil the celebration.

Still, men would be men. Maybe Aaron would be different, though perhaps he too would go back in time into the human world and forget what he was learning here. The creatures who were his fathers were also men's fathers: and the marriage of semen in Lucy's body was the same mix that made the first males. Women had always existed: they had lived, a species to themselves, with the demons. But they had wanted playmates: and together they had made men.

What an error, what a cataclysmic miscalculation. Within mere eons, the worst rooted out the best; the women were made slaves, the demons killed or driven underground, leaving only a few pockets of survivors to attempt again that first experiment, and make men, like Aaron, who would be wiser to their histories. Only by infiltrating humanity with new male children could the master race be made milder. That chance was slim enough, without the interference of more angry children, their fat white fists hot with guns.

Aaron scented Packard and his stepfather, and smelling them, knew

them to be alien. After tonight they would be known dispassionately, like animals of a different species. It was the gorgeous array of demons around him he felt closest to, and he knew he would protect them, if necessary, with his life.

Packard's car led the attack. The wave of vehicles appeared out of the darkness, their sirens blaring, their headlights on, and drove straight towards the knot of celebrants. From one or two of the cars terrified cops let out spontaneous howls of tenor when the full spectacle came into view, but by that time the attack force was committed. Shots were fired. Aaron felt his fathers close around him protectively, their flesh now darkening with anger and fear. Packard knew instinctively that these things were capable of fear, he could smell it off them. It was part of his job to recognize fear, to play on it, to use it against the miscreant. He screeched his orders into his microphone and led the cars into the circle of demons. In the back of one of the following cars Davidson closed his eyes and offered up a prayer to Yahweh, Buddha and Groucho Marx. Grant me power, grant me indifference, grant me a sense of humour. But nothing came to assist him: his bladder still bubbled, and his throat still throbbed.

Ahead, the shriek of brakes. Davidson opened his eyes (just a slit) and caught sight of one of the creatures wrapping its purple-black arm around Packard's car and lifting it into the air. One of the back doors flung open and a figure he recognized as Eleanor Kooker fell the few feet to the ground followed closely by Eugene. Leaderless, the cars were in a frenzy of collisions – the whole scene partially eclipsed by smoke and dust. There was the sound of breaking windscreens as cops took the quick way out of their cars; the shrieks of crumpling hoods and sheered off doors. The dying howl of a crushed siren; the dying plea of a crushed cop.

Packard's voice was clear enough, however, howling orders from his car even as it was lifted higher into the air, its engine revving, its wheels spinning foolishly in space. The demon was shaking the car as a child might a toy until the driver's door opened and Jebediah fell to the ground at the creature's skirt of skin. Davidson saw the skirt envelop the broken-backed deputy and appear to suck him into its folds. He could see too how Eleanor was standing up to the towering demon as it devoured her son.

"Jebediah, come out of there!" she shrieked, and fired shot after shot into his devourer's featureless, cylindrical head. Davidson got out of the car to see better. Across a clutter of crashed vehicles and blood-splattered hoods he could make the whole scene out more plainly. The

demons were sloping away from the battle, leaving this one extraordinary monster to hold the bridgehead. Quietly Davidson offered up a prayer of thanks to any passing deity. The divils were disappearing. There's be no pitched battle: no hand-to-tentacle fight. The boy would be simply eaten alive, or whatever they planned for the poor little bastard. Indeed, couldn't he see Aaron from where he stood? Wasn't that his frail form the retreating demons were holding so high, like a trophy?

With Eleanor's curses and accusations in their ears the sheltering cops began to emerge from their hiding-places to surround the remaining demon. There was, after all, only one left to face, and it had their Napoleon in its slimy grip. They let off volley upon volley into its creases and tucks, and against the impartial geometry of its head, but the divil seemed unconcerned. Only when it had shaken Packard's car until the Sheriff rattled like a dead frog in a tin can did it lose interest and drop the vehicle. A smell of gasoline filled the air, and turned Davidson's stomach. Then a cry: "Heads down!"

A grenade? Surely not; not with so much gasoline on the -Davidson fell to the floor. A sudden silence, in which an injured man could be heard whimpering somewhere in the chaos, then the dull, earth-rocking thud of the erupting grenade.

Somebody said Jesus Christ – with a kind of victory in his voice.

Jesus Christ. In the name of… for the glory of…

The demon was ablaze. The thin tissue of its gasoline soaked skirt was burning; one of its limbs had been blown off by the blast, another partially destroyed; thick, colourless blood splashed from the wounds and the stump. There was a smell in the air like burnt candy: the creature was clearly in an agony of cremation. Its body reeled and shuddered as the flames licked up to ignite its empty face, and it stumbled away from its tormentors, not sounding its pain. Davidson got a kick out of seeing it burn: like the simple pleasure he had from putting the heel of his boot in the centre of a jelly-fish. Favourite summer-time occupation of his childhood. In Maine: hot afternoons: spiking men-o'-war.

Packard was being dragged out of the wreckage of his car. My God, that man was made of steel: he was standing upright and calling his men to advance on the enemy. Even in his finest hour, a flake of fire dropped from the flowering demon, and touched the lake of gasoline Packard was standing in. A moment later he, the car, and two of his

saviours were enveloped in a billowing cloud of white fire. They stood no chance of survival: the flames just washed them away. Davidson could see their dark forms being wasted in the heart of the inferno, wrapped in folds of fire, curling in on themselves as they perished.

Almost before Packard's body had hit the ground Davidson could hear Eugene's voice over the flames. "See what they've done? See what they've done?"

The accusation was greeted by feral howls from the cops. "Waste them!" Eugene was screaming. "Waste them!"

Lucy could hear the noise of the battle, but she made no attempt to go in the direction of the foothills. Something about the way the moon was suspended in the sky, and the smell on the breeze, had taken all desire to move out of her. Exhausted, and enchanted, she stood in the open desert, and watched the sky.

When, after an age, she brought her gaze back down to fix on the horizon, she saw two things that were of mild interest. Out of the hills, a dirty smudge of smoke, and the edge of her vision in the gentle night light, a line of creatures, hurrying away from the hills. She suddenly began to run.

It occurred to her, as she ran, that her gait was sprightly as a young girl's, and that she had a young girl's motive: that is, she was in pursuit of her lover.

In an empty stretch of desert, the convocation of demons simply disappeared from sight. From where Lucy was standing, panting in the middle of nowhere, they seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth. She broke into a run again. Surely she could see her son and his fathers once more before they left forever? Or was she, after all her years of anticipation, to be denied even that?

In the lead car Davidson was driving, commandeered to do so by Eugene, who was not at present a man to be argued with. Something about the way he carried his rifle suggested he'd shoot first and ask questions later; his orders to the straggling army that followed him were two parts incoherent obscenities to one part sense. His eyes gleamed with hysteria: his mouth dribbled a little. He was a wild man, and he terrified Davidson. But it was too late now to turn back: he was in cahoots with the man for this last, apocalyptic pursuit.

"See, them black-eyed sons of bitches don't have no fucking heads," Eugene was screaming over the tortured roar of the engine. "Why you

taking this track so slow, boy?"

He jabbed the rifle in Davidson's crotch.

"Drive, or I'll blow your brains out."

"I don't know which way they've gone," Davidson yelled back at Eugene.

"What you mean? Show me!"

"I can't show you if they've disappeared."

Eugene just about appreciated the sense of the response. "Slow down, boy." He waved out of the car window to slow the rest of the army.

"Stop the car – stop the car!"

Packard brought the car to a halt.

"And put those fucking lights out. All of you!" The headlights were quenched. Behind, the rest of the entourage followed suit.

A sudden dark. A sudden silence. There was nothing to be seen or heard in any direction. They'd disappeared, the whole cacophonous tribe of demons had simply vanished into the air, chimerical.

The desert vista brightened as their eyes became accustomed to the gleam of the moonlight. Eugene got out of the car, rifle still at the ready, and stared at the sand, willing it to explain.

"Fuckers," he said, very softly.

Lucy had stopped running. Now she was walking towards the line of cars. It was all over by now. They had all been tricked: the disappearing act was a trump card no-one could have anticipated.

Then, she heard Aaron.

She couldn't see him, but his voice was as clear as a bell; and like a bell, it summoned. Like a bell, it rang out: this is a time of festival: celebrate with us.

Eugene heard it too; he smiled. They were near after all.

"Hey!" the boy's voice said. "Where is he? You see him, Davidson?"

Davidson shook his head. Then -”Wait! Wait! I see a light – look, straight ahead awhile."

"I see it."

With exaggerated caution, Eugene motioned Davidson back into the driver's seat.

"Drive, boy. But slowly. And no lights."

Davidson nodded. More jelly-fish for the spiking, he thought; they were going to get the bastards after all, and wasn't that worth a little risk? The convoy started up again, creeping forward at a snail's pace.

Lucy began to run once more: she could see the tiny figure of Aaron now, standing on the lip of a slope that led under the sand. The cars were moving towards it.

Seeing them approaching, Aaron stopped his calls and began to walk away, back down the slope. There was no need to wait any longer, they were following for certain. His naked feet made scarcely a mark in the soft-sanded incline that led away from the idiocies of the world. In the shadows of the earth at the end of that slope, fluttering and smiling at him, he could see his family.

"He's going in," said Davidson.

"Then follow the little bastard," said Eugene. "Maybe the kid doesn't know what he's doing. And get some light on him."

The headlights illuminated Aaron. His clothes were in tatters, and his body was slumped with exhaustion as he walked.

A few yards off to the right of the slope Lucy watched as the lead car drove over the lip of the earth and followed the boy down, into -”No," she said to herself, “don't."

Davidson was suddenly scared. He began to slow the car.

"Get on with it, boy." Eugene jabbed the rifle into his crotch again. "We've got them cornered. We've got a whole nest of them here. The boy's leading us right to them."

The cars were all on the slope now, following the leader, their wheels slipping in the sand.

Aaron turned. Behind him, illuminated only by the phosphorescence

of their own matter, the demons stood; a mass of impossible geometries. All the attributes of Lucifer were spread among the bodies of the fathers. The extraordinary anatomies, the dreaming spires of heads, the scales, the skirts, the claws, the clippers. Eugene brought the convoy to a halt, got out of the car and began to walk towards Aaron.

"Thank you boy," he said. "Come here – we'll look after you now. We've got them. You're safe." Aaron stared at his father, uncomprehending.

The army was disgorging from the cars behind Eugene, readying their weapons. A bazooka was being hurriedly assembled; a cocking of rifles, a weighing-up of grenades.

"Come to Papa, boy," Eugene coaxed.

Aaron didn't move, so Eugene followed him a few yards deeper into the ground. Davidson was out of the car now, shaking from head to foot.

"Maybe you should put down the rifle. Maybe he's scared," he suggested.

Eugene grunted, and let the muzzle of the rifle drop a few inches.

"You're safe," said Davidson. "It's all right."

"Walk towards us, boy. Slowly."

Aaron's face began to flush. Even in the deceptive light of the headlamps it was clearly changing colour. His cheeks were blowing up like balloons, and the skin on his forehead was wriggling as though his flesh was full of maggots. His head seemed to liquefy, to become a soup of shapes, shifting and blossoming like a cloud, the faɜade of boyhood broken as the father inside the son showed its vast and unimaginable face.

Even as Aaron became his father's son, the slope began to soften. Davidson felt it first: a slight shift in the texture of the sand, as though an order had passed through it, subtle but all-pervasive.

Eugene could only gape as Aaron's transformation continued, his entire body now overtaken by the tremors of change. His belly had become distended and a harvest of cones budded from it, which even now flowered into dozens of coiled legs; the change was Marvelous in

its complexity, as out of the cradle of the boy's substance came new glories.

Without warning Eugene raised his rifle and fired at his son.

The bullet struck the boy-demon in the middle of his face. Aaron fell back, his transformation still taking its course even as his blood, a stream part scarlet, part silver, ran from his wound into the liquefying earth. The geometries in the darkness moved out of hiding to help the child. The intricacy of their forms was simplified in the glare of the headlamps but they seemed, even as they appeared, to be changing again: bodies becoming thin in their grief, a whine of mourning like a solid wall of sound from their hearts.

Eugene raised his rifle a second time, whooping at his victory. He had them… My God, he had them. Dirty, stinking, faceless flickers.

But the mud beneath his feet was like warm treacle as it rose around his shins, and when he fired he lost balance. He yelled for assistance, but Davidson was already staggering back up the slope out of the gully fighting a losing battle against the rising mire. The rest of the army were similarly trapped, as the desert liquefied beneath them, and glutinous mud began to creep up the slope.

The demons had gone: retreated into the dark, their lament sunk away.

Eugene, flat on his back in the sinking sand, fired off two useless, vehement shots into the darkness beyond Aaron's corpse. He was kicking like a hog with its throat cut, and with every kick his body sunk deeper. As his face disappeared beneath the mud, he just glimpsed Lucy, standing at the edge of the slope, staring down towards Aaron's body. Then the mire covered his face, and blotted him out.

The desert was upon them with lightning speed.

One or two of the cars were already entirely submerged, and the tide of sand climbing the slope was relentlessly catching up with the escapees. Feeble cries for assistance ended with choking silences as mouths were filled with desert; somebody was shooting at the ground in an hysterical attempt to dam the flow, but it reached up swiftly to snatch every last one of them. Even Eleanor Kooker wasn't to be let free: she struggled, cursing and pressing the thrashing body of a cop deeper into the sand in her frantic attempts to step out of the gully.

There were universal howls now, as panicking men groped and grasped at each other for support, desperately trying to keep their heads afloat in the sea of sand.

Davidson was buried up to his waist. The ground that eddied about his lower half was hot and curiously inviting. The intimacy of its pressure had given him an erection. A few yards behind him a cop was screaming blue murder as the desert ate him up. Further still from him he could see a face peering out from the seething ground like a living mask thrown on the earth. There was an arm close by, still waving, as it sank; a pair of fat buttocks was poking up from the silt sea like two watermelons, a policeman's farewell.

Lucy took one step backwards as the mud slightly overran the lip of the gully, but it didn't reach her feet. Nor, curiously, did it dissipate itself, as a water-wave might have done.

Like concrete, it hardened, fixing its living trophies like flies in amber. From the lips of every face that still took air came a fresh cry of terror, as they felt the desert floor stiffen around their struggling limbs.

Davidson saw Eleanor Kooker, buried to breast-level. Tears were pouring down her cheeks; she was sobbing like a little girl. He scarcely thought of himself. Of the East, of Barbara, of the children, he thought not at all. The men whose faces were buried but whose limbs, or parts of bodies, still broke surface, were dead of asphyxiation by now. Only Eleanor Kooker, Davidson and two other men survived. One was locked in the earth up to his chin, Eleanor was buried so that her breasts sat on the ground, her arms were free to beat uselessly at the ground that held her fast. Davidson himself was held from his hips down. And most horribly, one pathetic victim was seen only by his nose and mouth. His head was tipped back into the ground, blinded by rock. Still he breathed, still he screamed. Eleanor Kooker was scrabbling at the ground with torn nails, but this was not loose sand. It was immovable. "Get help," she demanded of Lucy, hands bleeding.

The two women stared at each other.

"Jesus God!" screamed the Mouth.

The Head was silent: by his glazed look it was apparent that he'd lost his mind.

"Please help us…" pleaded Davidson's Torso. "Fetch help."

Lucy nodded.

"Go!" demanded Eleanor Kooker. "Go!"

Numbly, Lucy obeyed. Already there was a glimmer of dawn in the east. The air would soon be blistering. In Welcome, three hours walk away, she would find only old men, hysterical women and children. She would have to summon help from perhaps fifty miles distance. Even assuming she found her way back. Even assuming she didn't collapse exhausted to the sand and die.

It would be noon before she could fetch help to the woman, to the Torso, to the Head, to the Mouth. By that time the wilderness would have had the best of them. The sun would have boiled their brain-pans dry, snakes would have nested in their hair, the buzzards would have hooked out their helpless eyes.

She glanced round once more at their trivial forms, dwarfed by the bloody sweep of the dawn sky. Little dots and commas of human pain on a blank sheet of sand; she didn't care to think of the pen that wrote them there. That was for tomorrow.

After a while, she began to run.

XI: NEW MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE

Winter, Lewis decided, was no season for old men. The snow that lay five inches thick on the streets of Paris froze him to the marrow. What had been a joy to him as a child was now a curse. He hated it with all his heart; hated the snowballing children (squeals, howls, tears); hated, too, the young lovers, eager to be caught in a flurry together (squeals, kisses, tears). It was uncomfortable and tiresome, and he wished he was in Fort Lauderdale, where the sun would be shining.

But Catherine's telegram, though not explicit, had been urgent, and the ties of friendship between them had been unbroken for the best part of fifty years. He was here for her, and for her brother Phillipe. However thin his blood felt in this ice land, it was foolish to complain. He'd come at a summons from the past, and he would have come as swiftly, and as willingly, if Paris had been burning.

Besides, it was his mother's city. She'd been born on the Boulevard Diderot, back in a time when the city was untrammelled by free-thinking architects and social engineers. Now every time Lewis returned to Paris he steeled himself for another desecration. It was happening less of late, he'd noticed. The recession in Europe made governments less eager with their bulldozers. But still, year after year, more fine houses found themselves rubble. Whole streets sometimes, gone to ground.

Even the Rue Morgue.

There was, of course, some doubt as to whether that infamous street had ever existed in the first place, but as his years advanced Lewis had seen less and less purpose in distinguishing between fact and fiction. That great divide was for young men, who still had to deal with life. For the old (Lewis was 73), the distinction was academic. What did it matter what was true and what was false, what real and what invented? In his head all of it, the half-lies and the truths, were one continuum of personal history.

Maybe the Rue Morgue had existed, as it had been described in Edgar Allan Poe's immortal story; maybe it was pure invention. Whichever, the notorious street was no longer to be found on a map of Paris.

Perhaps Lewis was a little disappointed not to have found the Rue Morgue. After all, it was part of his heritage. If the stories he had been told as a young boy were correct, the events described in the Murders in the Rue Morgue had been narrated to Poe by Lewis's grandfather. It was his mother's pride that her father had met Poe, while traveling in America. Apparently his grandfather had been a globe-trotter, unhappy unless he visited a new town every week. And in the winter of 1835 he had been in Richmond, Virginia. It was a bitter winter, perhaps not unlike the one Lewis was presently suffering, and one night the grandfather had taken refuge in a bar in Richmond. There, with a blizzard raging outside, he had met a small, dark, melancholy young man called Eddie. He was something of a local celebrity apparently, having written a tale that had won a competition in the Baltimore Saturday Visitor. The tale was MS found in a bottle and the haunted young man was Edgar Allan Poe. The two had spent the evening together, drinking, and (this is how the story went, anyway) Poe had gently pumped Lewis's grandfather for stories of the bizarre, of the occult and of the morbid. The worldly-wise traveler was glad to oblige, pouring out believe-it-or-not fragments that the writer later turned into The Mystery of Marie Roget and The Murders in the Rue Morgue. In both those stories, peering out from between the atrocities, was the peculiar genius of C. Auguste Dupin.

C. Auguste Dupin. Poe's vision of the perfect detective: calm, rational and brilliantly perceptive. The narratives in which he appeared rapidly became well-known, and through them Dupin became a fictional celebrity, without anyone in America knowing that Dupin was a real person.

He was the brother of Lewis's grandfather. Lewis's great uncle was C. Auguste Dupin.

And his greatest case – the Murders in the Rue Morgue -they too were based on fact. The slaughters that occurred in the story had actually taken place. Two women had indeed been brutally killed in the Rue Morgue. They were, as Poe had written, Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter Mademoiselle Camille L'Espanaye. Both women of good reputation, who lived quiet and unsensational lives. So much more horrible then to find those lives so brutally cut short. The daughter's body had been thrust up the chimney; the body of the mother was discovered in the yard at the back of the house, her throat cut with such savagery that her head was all but sawn off. No apparent motive could be found for the murders, and the mystery further deepened when all the occupants of the house claimed to have heard the voice of the murderer speaking in a different language. The

Frenchman was certain the voice had spoken Spanish, the Englishman had heard German, the Dutchman thought it was French. Dupin, in his investigations, noted that none of the witnesses actually spoke the language they claimed to have heard from the lips of the unseen murderer. He concluded that the language was no language at all, but the wordless voice of a wild beast. An ape in fact, a monstrous orang-outang from the East Indian Islands. Its tawny hairs had been found in the grip of the slain Madame L'Espanaye. Only its strength and agility made the appalling fate of Mademoiselle L'Espanaye plausible. The beast had belonged to a Maltese sailor, had escaped, and run riot in the bloody apartment on the Rue Morgue.

That was the bones of the story.

Whether true or not the tale held a great romantic appeal for Lewis. He liked to think of his great uncle logically pacing his way through the mystery, undistressed by the hysteria and horror around him. He thought of that calm as essentially European; belonging to a lost age in which the light of reason was still valued, and the worst horror that could be conceived of was a beast with a cut-throat razor.

Now, as the twentieth century ground through its last quarter, there were far greater atrocities to be accounted for, all committed by human beings. The humble orang-outang had been investigated by anthropologists and found to be a solitary herbivore; quiet and philosophical. The true monsters were far less apparent, and far more powerful. Their weapons made razors look pitiful; their crimes were vast. In some ways Lewis was almost glad to be old and close to leaving the century to its own devices. Yes, the snow froze his marrow. Yes, to see a young girl with a face of a goddess uselessly stirred his desires. Yes, he felt like an observer now instead of a participator. But it had not always been that way.

In 1937, in the very room at number eleven, Quai de Bourbon, where he now sat, there had been experience enough. Paris was still a pleasure-dome in those days, studiously ignoring rumours of war, and preserving, though at times the strain told, an air of sweet naïveté. They had been careless then; in both senses of the word, living endless lives of perfect leisure.

It wasn't so of course. The lives had not been perfect, or endless. But for a time – a summer, a month, a day – it had seemed nothing in the world would change.

In half a decade Paris would burn, and its playful guilt, which was

true innocence, would be soiled permanently. They had spent many days (and nights) in the apartment Lewis now occupied, wonderful times; when he thought of them his stomach seemed to ache with the loss.

His thoughts turned to more recent events. To his New York exhibition, in which his series of paintings chronicling the damnation of Europe had been a brilliant critical success. At the age of seventy-three Lewis Fox was a feted man. Articles were being written in every art periodical. Admirers and buyers had sprung up like mushrooms overnight, eager to purchase his work, to talk with him, to touch his hand. All too late, of course. The agonies of creation were long over, and he'd put down his brushes for the last time five years ago. Now, when he was merely a spectator, his critical triumph seemed like a parody: he viewed the circus from a distance with something approaching distaste.

When the telegram had come from Paris, begging for his assistance, he had been more than pleased to slip away from the ring of imbeciles mouthing his praise.

Now he waited in the darkening apartment, watching the steady flow of cars across the Pont Louis-Phillipe, as tired Parisians began the trek home through the snow. Their horns blared; their engines coughed and growled; their yellow fog lamps made a ribbon of light across the bridge.

Still Catherine didn't come.

The snow, which had held off for most of the day, was beginning to fall again, whispering against the window. The traffic flowed across the Seine, the Seine flowed under the traffic. Night fell. At last, he heard footsteps in the hail; exchanged whispers with the housekeeper.

It was Catherine. At last, it was Catherine.

He stood up and stared at the door, imagining it opening before it opened, imagining her in the doorway. "Lewis, my darling -”

She smiled at him; a pale smile on a paler face. She looked older than he'd expected. How long was it since he'd seen her? Four years or five? Her fragrance was the same as she always wore: and it reassured Lewis with its permanence. He kissed her cold cheeks lightly.

"You look well," he lied.

"No I don't," she said. "If I look well it's an insult to Phillipe. How can I be well when he's in such trouble?" Her manner was brisk, and forbidding, as always.

She was three years his senior, but she treated him as a teacher would a recalcitrant child. She always had: it was her way of being fond.

Greetings over, she sat down beside the window, staring out over the Seine. Small grey ice-floes floated under the bridge, rocking and revolving in the current. The water looked deadly, as though its bitterness could crush the breath out of you.

"What trouble is Phillipe in?"

"He's accused of-"

A tiny hesitation. A flicker of an eyelid.

"- murder."

Lewis wanted to laugh; the very thought was preposterous. Phillipe was sixty-nine years old, and as mild-mannered as a lamb.

"It's true, Lewis. I couldn't tell you by telegram, you understand. I had to say it myself. Murder. He's accused of murder."

"Who?"

"A girl, of course. One of his fancy women."

"He still gets around, does he?"

"We used to joke he'd die on a woman, remember?"

Lewis half-nodded.

"She was nineteen. Natalie Perec. Quite an educated girl, apparently. And lovely. Long red hair. You remember how Phillipe loved redheads?"

"Nineteen? He has nineteen year olds?"

She didn't reply. Lewis sat down, knowing his pacing of the room irritated her. In profile she was still beautiful, and the wash of yellow-blue through the window softened the lines on her face, magically erasing fifty years of living. "Where is he?"

"They locked him up. They say he's dangerous. They say he could kill again."

Lewis shook his head. There was a pain at his temples, which might go if he could only close his eyes. "He needs to see you. Very badly."

But maybe sleep was just an escape. Here was something even he couldn't be a spectator to.

Phillipe Laborteaux stared at Lewis across the bare, scored table, his face weary and lost. They had greeted each other only with handshakes; all other physical contact was strictly forbidden.

"I am in despair," he said. "She's dead. M y Natalie is dead."

"Tell me what happened."

"I have a little apartment in Montmartre. In the Rue des Martyrs. Just a room really, to entertain friends. Catherine always keeps number 11 SO neat, you know, a man can't spread himself out. Natalie used to spend a lot of time with me there: everyone in the house knew her. She was so good natured, so beautiful. She was studying to go into Medical School. Bright. And she loved me."

Phillipe was still handsome. In fact, as the fashion in looks came full circle his elegance, his almost dashing face, his unhurried charm were the order of the day. A breath of a lost age, perhaps.

"I went out on Sunday morning: to the patisserie. And when I came back…"

The words failed him for a moment.

"Lewis…"

His eyes filled with tears of frustration. This was so difficult for him his mouth refused to make the necessary sounds.

"Don't -" Lewis began.

"I want to tell you, Lewis. I want you to know, I want you to see her as I saw her – so you know what there is. there is… what there is in the world."

The tears ran down his face in two graceful rivulets. He gripped Lewis' hand in his, so tightly it ached. "She was covered in blood. In wounds. Skin torn off hair torn out. Her tongue was on the pillow,

Lewis. Imagine that. She'd bitten it off in her terror. It was just lying on the pillow. And her eyes, all swimming in blood, like she'd wept blood. She was the dearest thing in all creation, Lewis. She was beautiful."

"No more."

"I want to die, Lewis."

"No."

"I don't want to live now. There's no point."

"They won't find you guilty."

"I don't care, Lewis. You must look after Catherine now. I read about the exhibition -"

He almost smiled.

"- Wonderful for you. We always said, didn't we? Before the war, you'd be the one to be famous, I'd be -" The smile had gone.

"- notorious. They say terrible things about me now, in the newspapers. An old man going with young girls, you see, that doesn't make me very wholesome. They probably think I lost my temper because I couldn't perform with her. That's what they think, I'm certain." He lost his way, halted, began again. "You must look after Catherine. She's got money, but no friends. She's too cool, you see. Too hurt inside; and that makes people wary of her. You have to stay with her."

"I shall."

"I know. I know. That's why I feel happy, really, to just…: "No, Phillipe."

"Just die. There's nothing left for us, Lewis. The world's too hard."

Lewis thought of the snow, and the ice-floes, and saw the sense in dying.

The officer in charge of the investigation was less than helpful, though Lewis introduced himself as a relative of the esteemed Detective Dupin. Lewis's contempt for the shoddily-dressed weasel, sitting in his cluttered hole of an office, made the interview crackle with suppressed anger.

"Your friend," the Inspector said, picking at the raw cuticle of his thumb, “is a murderer, Monsieur Fox. It is as simple as that. The evidence is overwhelming."

"I can't believe that."

"Believe what you like to believe, that's your prerogative. We have all the evidence we need to convict Phillipe Laborteaux of murder in the first degree. It was a cold-blooded killing and he will be punished to the full extent of the law. This is my promise."

"What evidence do you have against him?"

"Monsieur Fox; I am not beholden to you. What evidence we have is our business. Suffice it to say that no other person was seen in the house during the time that the accused claims he was at some fictional patisserie; and as access to the room in which the deceased was found is only possible by the stairs -”

"What about a window?"

"A plain wall: three flights up. Maybe an acrobat: an acrobat might do it."

"And the state of the body?"

The Inspector made a face. Disgust.

"Horrible. Skin and muscle stripped from the bone. All the spine exposed. Blood; much blood." "Phillipe is seventy."

"So?"

"An old man would not be capable -”

"In other respects," the Inspector interrupted, “he seems to have been quite capable, oui? The lover, yes? The passionate lover: he was capable of that."

"And what motive would you claim he had?"

His mouth scalloped, his eyes rolled and he tapped his chest.

"Le coeur humain," he said, as if despairing of reason in affairs of the heart. "Le coeur humain, quel mystиre, n'estce pas?" and exhaling the stench of his ulcer at Lewis, he proffered the open door.

"Merci, Monsieur Fox. I understand your confusion, oui? But you are wasting your time. A crime is a crime. It is real; not like your paintings."

He saw the surprise on Lewis's face.

"Oh, I am not so uncivilized as not to know your reputation, Monsieur Fox. But I ask you, make your fictions as best you can; that is your genius, oui? Mine; to investigate the truth."

Lewis couldn't bear the weasel's cant any longer.

"Truth?" he snapped back at the Inspector. "You wouldn't know the truth if you tripped over it." The weasel looked as though he'd been slapped with a wet fish.

It was precious little satisfaction; but it made Lewis feel better for at least five minutes.

The house on the Rue des Martyrs was not in good condition, and Lewis could smell the damp as he climbed to the little room on the third floor. Doors opened as he passed, and inquiring whispers ushered him up the stairs, but nobody tried to stop him. The room where the atrocity had happened was locked. Frustrated, but not knowing how or why it would help Phillipe's case to see the interior of the room, he made his way back down the stairs and into the bitter air.

Catherine was back at the Quai de Bourbon. As soon as Lewis saw her he knew there was something new to hear. Her grey hair was loosed from the bun she favoured wearing, and hung unbraided at her shoulders. Her face was a sickly yellow-grey by the lamplight. She shivered, even in the clogged air of the centrally-heated apartment. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I went to Phillipe's apartment."

"So did I. It was locked."

"I have the key: Phillipe's spare key. I just wanted to pick up a few clothes for him."

Lewis nodded.

"And?"

"Somebody else was there."

"Police?"

"No."

"Who?"

"I couldn't see. I don't know exactly. He was dressed in a big coat, scarf over his face. Hat. Gloves." She paused. Then, “he had a razor, Lewis."

"A razor?"

"An open razor, like a barber."

Something jangled in the back of Lewis Fox's mind.

An open razor; a man dressed so well he couldn't be recognized.

"I was terrified."

"Did he hurt you?" She shook her head. "I screamed and he ran away." "Didn't say anything to you?" "No." "Maybe a friend of Phillipe's?" "I know Phillipe's friends." "Then of the girl. A brother." "Perhaps. But -”"What?" "There was something odd about him. He smelt of perfume, stank of it, and he walked with such mincing little steps, even though he was huge."

Lewis put his arm around her.

"Whoever it was, you scared them off. You just mustn't go back there. If we have to fetch clothes for Phillipe, I'll gladly go."

"Thank you. I feel a fool: he may have just stumbled in. Com e to look at the murder-chamber. People do that, don't they? Out of some morbid fascination…"

"Tomorrow I'll speak to the Weasel."

"Weasel?"

"Inspector Marais. Have him search the place."

"Did you see Phillipe?"

"Yes."

"Is he well?"

Lewis said nothing for a long moment.

"He wants to die, Catherine. He's given up fighting already, before he goes to trial."

"But he didn't do anything."

"We can't prove that."

"You're always boasting about your ancestors. Your blessed Dupin. You prove it…"

"Where do I start?"

"Speak to some of his friends, Lewis. Please. Maybe the woman had enemies."

Jacques Solal stared at Lewis through his round-bellied spectacles, his irises huge and distorted through the glass. He was the worse for too much cognac.

"She hadn't got any enemies," he said, “not her. Oh maybe a few women jealous of her beauty…" Lewis toyed with the wrapped cubes of sugar that had come with his coffee. Solal was as uninformative as he was drunk; but unlikely as it seemed Catherine had described the runt across the table as Phillipe's closest friend. "Do you think Phillipe murdered her?"

Solal pursed his lips.

"Who knows?"

"What's your instinct?"

"Ah; he was my friend. If I knew who had killed her I would say so."

It seemed to be the truth. Maybe the little man was simply drowning his sorrows in cognac.

"He was a gentlemen," Solal said, his eyes drifting towards the street. Through the steamed glass of the Brasserie window brave Parisians were struggling through the fury of another blizzard, vainly attempting to keep their dignity and their posture in the teeth of a gale.

"A gentleman," he said again.

"And the girl?"

"She was beautiful, and he was in love with her. She had other admirers, of course. A woman like her -" "Jealous admirers?"

"Who knows?"

Again: who knows? The inquiry hung on the air like a shrug. Who knows? Who knows? Lewis began to understand the Inspector's passion for truth. For the first time in ten years perhaps a goal appeared in his life; an ambition to shoot this indifferent 'who knows?" out of the air. To discover what had happened in that room on the Rue des Martyrs. Not an approximation, not a fictionalized account, but the truth, the absolute, unquestionable truth. "Do you remember if there were any particular men who fancied her?" he asked.

Solal grinned. He only had two teeth in his lower jaw.

"Oh yes. There was one."

"Who?"

"I never knew his name. A big man: I saw him outside the house three or four times. Though to smell him you'd have thought -"

He made an unmistakable face that implied he thought the man was homosexual. The arched eyebrows and the pursed lips made him look doubly ridiculous behind the thick spectacles.

"He smelt?"

"Oh yes."

"Of what?"

"Perfume, Lewis. Perfume."

Somewhere in Paris there was a man who had known the girl Phillipe loved. Jealous rage had overcome him. In a fit of uncontrollable anger he had broken into Phillipe's apartment and slaughtered the girl. It was as clear as that. Somewhere in Paris.

"Another cognac?"

Solal shook his head.

"Already I'm sick," he said.

Lewis called the waiter across, and as he did so his eye alighted on a cluster of newspaper clippings pinned behind the bar.

Solal followed his gaze.

"Phillipe: he liked the pictures," he said.

Lewis stood up.

"He came here, sometimes, to see them."

The cuttings were old, stained and fading. Some were presumably of purely local interest. Accounts of a fireball seen in a nearby street. Another about a boy of two burned to death in his cot. One concerned an escaped puma; one, an unpublished manuscript by Rimbaud; a third (accompanied by a photograph) detailed casualties in a plane crash at Orleans airport. But there were other cuttings too; some far older than others. Atrocities, bizarre murders, ritual rapes, an advertisement for "Fantomas', another for Cocteau's "La Belle et La Bete'. And almost buried under this embarrassment of bizarreries, was a sepia photograph so absurd it could have come from the hand of Max Ernst. A half-ring of well-dressed gentlemen, many sporting the thick moustaches popular in the eighteen-nineties, were grouped around the vast, bleeding bulk of an ape, which was suspended by its feet from a lamppost. The faces in the picture bore expressions of mute pride; of absolute authority over the dead beast, which Lewis clearly recognized as a gorilla. Its inverted head had an almost noble tilt in death. Its brow was deep and furrowed, its jaw, though shattered by a fearsome wound, was thinly bearded like that of a patrician, and its eyes, rolled back in its head, seemed full of concern for this merciless world. They reminded Lewis, those rolling eyes, of the Weasel in his hole, tapping his chest.

"Le coeur humain."

Pitiful.

"What is that?" he asked the acne-ridden barman, pointing at the picture of the dead gorilla.

A shrug was the reply: indifferent to the fate of men and apes.

"Who knows?" said Solal at his back. "Who knows?"

It was not the ape of Poe's story, that was certain. That tale had been told in 1835, and the photograph was far more recent. Besides, the ape in the picture was a gorilla: clearly a gorilla.

Had history repeated itself? Had another ape, a different species but an ape nevertheless, been loosed on the streets of Paris at the turn of the century?

And if so, if the story of the ape could repeat itself once why not twice?

As Lewis walked through the freezing night back to the apartment at the Quai de Bourbon, the imagined repetition of events became more attractive; and now further symmetry presented itself to him. Was it possible that he, the great nephew of C. Auguste Dupin, might become involved in another pursuit, not entirely dissimilar from the first? The key to Phillipe's room at the Rue des Martyrs was icy in Lewis's hand, and though it was now well past midnight he couldn't help but turn off at the bridge and make his way up the Boulevard de Sebastopol, west on to Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, then north again towards the Place Pigalle. It was a long, exhausting trudge, but he felt in need of the cold air, to keep his head clear of emotionalism. It took him an hour and a half to reach the Rue des Martyrs.

It was Saturday night, and there was still a lot of noise in a number of the rooms. Lewis made his way up the two flights as quietly as he could, his presence masked by the din. The key turned easily, and the door swung open. Street lights illuminated the room. The bed, which dominated the space, was bare. Presumably sheets and blankets had been taken away for forensic tests. The eruption of blood onto the mattress was a mulberry colour in the gloom. Otherwise, there was no sign of the violence the room had witnessed.

Lewis reached for the light switch, and snapped it on. Nothing happened. He stepped deeply into the room and stared up at the light fixture. The bulb was shattered.

He half thought of retreating, of leaving the room to darkness, and returning in the morning when there were fewer shadows. But as he stood under the broken bulb his eyes began to pierce the gloom a little better, and he began to make out the shape of a large teak chest of drawers along the far wall. Surely it was a matter of a few minutes work to find a change of clothes for Phillipe. Otherwise he would have

to return the next day; another long journey through the snow. Better to do it now, and save his bones.

The room was large, and had been left in chaos by the police. Lewis stumbled and cursed as he crossed to the chest of drawers, tripping over a fallen lamp, and a shattered vase. Downstairs the howls and shrieks of a well-advanced party drowned any noise he made. Was it an orgy or a fight? The noise could have been either. He struggled with the top drawer of the teak chest, and eventually wrenched it open, ferreting in the depths for the bare essentials of Phillipe's comfort: a clean undershirt, a pair of socks, initialed handkerchiefs, beautifully pressed. He sneezed. The chilly weather had thickened the catarrh on his chest and the mucus in his sinuses. A handkerchief was to hand, and he blew his nose, clearing his blocked nostrils. For the first time the smell of the room came to him. One odour predominated, above the damp, and the stale vegetables. Perfume, the lingering scent of perfume. He turned into the darkened room, hearing his bones creak, and his eyes fell on the shadow behind the bed. A huge shadow, a bulk that swelled as it rose into view.

It was, he saw at once, the razor-wielding stranger. He was here: in waiting.

Curiously, Lewis wasn't frightened.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, in a loud, strong voice.

As he emerged from his hiding place the face of the stranger came into the watery light from the street; a broad, flat featured, flayed face. His eyes were deep-set, but without malice; and he was smiling, smiling generously, at Lewis. "Who are you?" Lewis asked again.

The man shook his head; shook his body, in fact, his gloved hands gesturing around his mouth. Was he dumb? The shaking of the head was more violent now, as though he was about to have a fit.

"Are you all right?"

Suddenly, the shaking stopped, and to his surprise Lewis saw tears, large, syrupy tears well up in the stranger's eyes and roll down his rough cheeks and into the bush of his beard.

As if ashamed of his display of feelings, the man turned away from the light, making a thick noise of sobbing in his throat, and exited. Lewis followed, more curious about this stranger than nervous of his intentions. "Wait!"

The man was already half-way down the first flight of stairs, nimble despite his build.

"Please wait, I want to talk to you," Lewis began down the stairs after him, but the pursuit was lost before it was started. Lewis' joints were stiff with age and the cold, and it was late. No time to be running after a much younger man, along a pavement made lethal with ice and snow. He chased the stranger as far as the door and then watched him run off down the street; his gait was mincing as Catherine had said. Almost a waddle, ridiculous in a man so big. The smell of his perfume was already snatched away by the north-east wind. Breathless, Lewis climbed the stairs again, past the din of the party, to claim a set of clothes for Phillipe.

The next day Paris woke to a blizzard of unprecedented ferocity. The calls to Mass went unrequited, the hot Sunday croissants went unbought, the newspapers lay unread on the vendors' stalls. Few people had either the nerve or the motive to step outside into the howling gale. They sat by their fires, hugging their knees, and dreamt of spring. Catherine wanted to go to the prison to visit Phillipe, but Lewis insisted that he go alone. It was not simply the cold weather that made him cautious on her behalf; he had difficult words to say to Phillipe, delicate questions to ask him. After the previous night's encounter in his room, he had no doubt that Phillipe had a rival, probably a murderous rival. The only way to save Phillipe's life, it seemed, was to trace the man. And if that meant delving into Phillipe's sexual arrangements, then so be it. But it wasn't a conversation he, or Phillipe, would have wanted to conduct in Catherine's presence.

The fresh clothes Lewis had brought were searched, then given to Phillipe, who took them with a nod of thanks. "I went to the house last night to fetch these for you."

"Oh."

"There was somebody in the room already." Phillipe's jaw muscle began to churn, as he ground his teeth together. He was avoiding Lewis's eyes.

"A big man, with a beard. Do you know him, or of him?"

"No."

"Phillipe -"'No!"

"The same man attacked Catherine," Lewis said.

"What?" Phillipe had begun to tremble. "With a razor."

"Attacked her?" Phillipe said. "Are you sure?" "Or was going to."

"No! He would never have touched her. Never!"

"Who is it Phillipe? Do you know?"

"Tell her not to go there again; please, Lewis -" His eyes implored. "Please, for God's sake tell her never to go there again. W ill you do that? Or you. Not you either."

"Who is it?"

"Tell her."

"I will. But you must tell me who this man is, Phillipe." He shook his head, grinding his teeth together audibly now. "You wouldn't understand, Lewis. I couldn't expect you to understand."

"Tell me; I want to help."

"Just let me die."

"Who is he?"

"Just let me die… I want to forget, why do you try to make me remember? I want to -"

He looked up again: his eyes were bloodshot, and red-rimmed from nights of tears. But now it seemed there were no more tears left in him; just an arid place where there had been an honest fear of death, a love of love, and an appetite for life. What met Lewis's eyes was a universal indifference: to continuation, to self-preservation, to feeling.

"She was a whore," he suddenly exclaimed. His hands were fists. Lewis had never seen Phillipe make a fist in his life. Now his nails bit into the soft flesh of his palm until blood began to flow.

"Whore," he said again, his voice too loud in the little cell.

"Keep your row down," snapped the guard.

"A whore!" This time Phillipe hissed the accusation through teeth exposed like those of an angry baboon. Lewis could make no sense of the transformation.

"You began all this -" Phillipe said, looking straight at Lewis, meeting his eyes fully for the first time. It was a bitter accusation, though Lewis didn't understand its significance.

"Me?"

"With your stories. With your damn Dupin."

"Dupin?"

"It was all a lie: all stupid lies. W omen, murder-"

"You mean the Rue Morgue story?"

"You were so proud of that, weren't you? All those silly lies. None of it was true."

"Yes it was."

"No. It never was, Lewis: it was a story, that's all. Dupin, the Rue Morgue, the murders…"

His voice trailed away, as though the next words were unsayable. the ape."

Those were the words: the apparently unspeakable was spoken as though each syllable had been cut from his throat. the ape."

"What about the ape?"

"There are beasts, Lewis. Some of them are pitiful; circus animals. They have no brains; they are born victims. Then there are others."

"What others?"

"Natalie was a whore!" he screamed again, his eyes big as saucers. He took hold of Lewis' lapels, and began to shake him. Everybody else in the little room turned to look at the two old men as they wrestled over the table. Convicts and their sweethearts grinned as Phillipe was dragged off his friend, his words descending into incoherence and obscenity as he thrashed in the warder's grip.

"Whore! Whore! Whore!" was all he could say as they hauled him back to his cell.

Catherine met Lewis at the door of her apartment. She was shaking and tearful. Beyond her, the room was wrecked. She sobbed against

his chest as he comforted her, but she was inconsolable. It was many years since he'd comforted a woman, and he'd lost the knack of it. He was embarrassed instead of soothing, and she knew it. She broke away from his embrace, happier untouched.

"He was here," she said.

He didn't need to ask who. The stranger, the tearful, razor-wielding stranger.

"What did he want?"

"He kept saying "Phillipe' to me. Almost saying it; grunting it more than saying it: and when I didn't answer he just destroyed the furniture, the vases. He wasn't even looking for anything: he just wanted to make a mess." It made her furious: the uselessness of the attack.

The apartment was in ruins. Lewis wandered through the fragments of porcelain and shredded fabric, shaking his head. In his mind a confusion of tearful faces: Catherine, Phillipe, the stranger. Everyone in his narrow world, it seemed, was hurt and broken. Everyone was suffering; and yet the source, the heart of the suffering, was nowhere to be found.

Only Phillipe had pointed an accusing finger: at Lewis himself.

"You began all this." Weren't those his words?"You began all this."

But how?

Lewis stood at the window. Three of the small panes had been cracked by flying debris, and a wind was insinuating itself into the apartment, with frost in its teeth. He looked across at the ice-thickened waters of the Seine; then a movement caught his eye. His stomach turned.

The full face of the stranger was turned up to the window, his expression wild. The clothes he had always worn so impeccably were in disarray, and the look on his face was of utter, utter despair, so pitiful as to be almost tragic. Or rather, a performance of tragedy: an actor's pain. Even as Lewis stared down at him the stranger raised his arms to the window in a gesture that seemed to beg either forgiveness or understanding, or both.

Lewis backed away from the appeal. It was too much; all too much.

The next moment the stranger was walking across the courtyard away from the apartment. The mincing walk had deteriorated into a rolling lope. Lewis uttered a long, low moan of recognition as the ill-dressed bulk disappeared from view.

"Lewis?"

It wasn't a man's walk, that roll, that swagger. It was the gait of an upright beast who'd been taught to walk, and now, without its master, was losing the trick of it.

It was an ape.

Oh God, oh God, it was an ape.

"I have to see Phillipe Laborteaux."

"I'm sorry, Monsieur; but prison visitors -”"This is a matter of life and death, officer." "Easily said, Monsieur." Lewis risked a lie.

"His sister is dying. I beg you to have some compassion." "Oh… well…"

A little doubt. Lewis levered a little further. "A few minutes only; to settle arrangements." "Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"She'll be dead by morning."

Lewis hated talking about Catherine in such a way, even for the purpose of this deception, but it was necessary; he had to see Phillipe. If his theory was correct, history might repeat itself before the night was out. Phillipe had been woken from a sedated sleep. His eyes were circled with darkness.

"What do you want?"

Lewis didn't even attempt to proceed any further with his lie; Phillipe was drugged as it was, and probably confused. Best to confront him with the truth, and see what came of it.

"You kept an ape, didn't you?"

A look of terror crossed Phillipe's face, slowed by the drugs in his blood, but plain enough.

"Didn't you?"

"Lewis…" Phillipe looked so very old.

"Answer me, Phillipe, I beg you: before it's too late. Did you keep an ape?"

"It was an experiment, that's all it was. An experiment."

"Why?"

"Your stories. Your damn stories: I wanted to see if it was true that they were wild. I wanted to make a man of it." "Make a man of it."

"And that whore…"

"Natalie."

"She seduced it."

Lewis felt sick. This was a convolution he hadn't anticipated.

"Seduced it?"

"Whore," Phillipe said, with infinite regret.

"Where is this ape of yours?"

"You'll kill it."

"It broke into the apartment, while Catherine was there. Destroyed everything, Phillipe. It's dangerous now that it has no master. Don't you understand?"

"Catherine?"

"No, she's all right."

"It's trained: it wouldn't harm her. It's watched her, in hiding. Come and gone. Quiet as a mouse." "And the girl?"

"It was jealous."

"So it murdered her?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. I don't want to think about it."

"Why haven't you told them; had the thing destroyed?"

"I don't know if it's true. It's probably all a fiction, one of your damn

fictions, just another story." A sour, wily smile crossed his exhausted face.

"You must know what I mean, Lewis. It could be a story, couldn't it? Like your tales of Dupin. Except that maybe I made it true for a while; did you ever think of that? Maybe I made it true."

Lewis stood up. It was a tired debate: reality and illusion. Either a thing was, or was not. Life was not a dream. "Where is the ape?" he demanded.

Phillipe pointed to his temple.

"Here; where you can never find him," he said, and spat in Lewis' face. The spittle hit his lip, like a kiss. "You don't know what you did. You'll never know."

Lewis wiped his lip as the warders escorted the prisoner out of the room and back to his happy drugged oblivion. All he could think of now, left alone in the cold interview room, was that Phillipe had it easy. He'd taken refuge in pretended guilt, and locked himself away where memory, and revenge, and the truth, the wild, marauding truth, could never touch him again. He hated Phillipe at that moment, with all his heart. Hated him for the dilettante and the coward he'd always known him to be. It wasn't a more gentle world Phillipe had created around him; it was a hiding place, as much a lie as that summer of 1937 had been. No life could be lived the way he'd lived it without a reckoning coming sooner or later; and here it was.

That night, in the safety of his cell, Phillipe woke. It was warm, but he was cold. In the utter dark he chewed at his wrists until a pulse of blood bubbled into his mouth. He lay back on his bed, and quietly splashed and fountained away to death, out of sight and out of mind.

The suicide was reported in a small article on the second page of Le Monde. The big news of the following day however was the sensational murder of a redheaded prostitute in a little house off the Rue de Rochechquant. Monique Zevaco had been found at three o'clock in the morning by her flat mate, her body in a state so horrible as to 'defy description'.

Despite the alleged impossibility of the task, the media set about describing the indescribable with a morbid will. Every last scratch, tear and gouging on Monique's partially nude body – tattooed, drooled Le Monde, with a map of France – was chronicled in detail. As indeed was the appearance of her well-dressed, over-perfumed murderer, who

had apparently watched her at her toilet through a small back window, then broken in and attacked Mademoiselle Zevaco in her bathroom. The murderer had then fled down the stairs, bumping into the flat mate who would minutes after discover Mademoiselle Zevaco's mutilated corpse. Only one commentator made any connection between the murder at the Rue des Martyrs and the slaughter of Mme Zevaco; and he failed to pick up on the curious coincidence that the accused Phillipe Laborteaux had that same night taken his own life.

The funeral took place in a storm, the cortege edging its pitiful way through the abandoned streets towards Montparnasse with the lashing snow entirely blotting out the road ahead. Lewis sat with Catherine and Jacques Solal as they laid Phillipe to rest. Every one of his circle had deserted him, unwilling to attend the funeral of a suicide and of a suspected murderer. His wit, his good looks, his infinite capacity to charm went for nothing at the end.

He was not, as it turned out, entirely unmourned by strangers. As they stood at the graveside, the cold cutting into them, Solal sidled up to Lewis and nudged him.

"What?"

"Over there. Under the tree." Solal nodded beyond the praying priest.

The stranger was standing at a distance, almost hidden by the marble mausoleums. A heavy black scarf was wrapped across his face, and a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his brow, but his bulk was unmistakable. Catherine had seen him too. She was shaking as she stood, wrapped round by Lewis's embrace, not just with cold, but with fear. It was as though the creature was some morbid angel, come to hover a while, and enjoy the grief. It was grotesque, and eerie, that this thing should come to see Phillipe consigned to the frozen earth. "What did it feel? Anguish? Guilt? Yes, did it feel guilt?

It knew it had been seen, and it turned its back, shambling away. Without a word to Lewis, Jacques Solal slipped away from the grave in pursuit. In a short while both the stranger and his pursuer were erased by the snow. Back at the Quai de Bourbon Catherine and Lewis said nothing of the incident. A kind of barrier had appeared between them, forbidding contact on any level but the most trivial. There was no purpose in analysis, and none in regrets. Phillipe was dead. The past, their past together, was dead. This final chapter in their joint lives soured utterly everything that preceded it, so that no shared

memory could be enjoyed without the pleasure being spoilt. Phillipe had died horribly, devouring his own flesh and blood, perhaps driven mad by a knowledge he possessed of his own guilt and depravity. No innocence, no history of joy could remain unstained by that fact. Silently they mourned the loss, not only of Phillipe, but of their own past. Lewis understood now Phillipe's reluctance to live when there was such loss in the world.

Solal rang. Breathless after his chase, but elated, he spoke in whispers to Lewis, clearly enjoying the excitement. "I'm at the Gare du Nord, and I've found out where our friend lives. I've found him, Lewis!"

"Excellent. I'll come straight away. I'll meet you on the steps of the Gare du Nord. I'll take a cab: ten minutes." "It's in the basement of number sixteen, Rue des Fleurs. I'll see you there -" "Don't go in, Jacques. Wait for me. Don't -"The telephone clicked and Solal was gone. Lewis reached for his coat. "Who was that?"

She asked, but she didn't want to know. Lewis shrugged on his overcoat and said: "Nobody at all. Don't worry. I won't be long."

"Take your scarf," she said, not glancing over her shoulder.

"Yes. Thank you."

"You'll catch a chill."

He left her gazing over the night-clad Seine, watching the ice-floes dance together on the black water.

When he arrived at the house on the Rue des Fleurs, Solal was not to be seen, but fresh footprints in the powdery snow led to the front door of number sixteen and then, foiled, went around the back of the house. Lewis followed them. As he stepped into the yard behind the house, through a rotted gate that had been crudely forced by Solal, he realized he had come without a weapon. Best to go back, perhaps, find a crowbar, a knife; something. Even as he was debating with himself, the back door opened, and the stranger appeared, dressed in his now familiar overcoat. Lewis flattened himself against the wall of the yard, where the shadows were deepest, certain that he would be seen. But the beast was about other business. He stood in the doorway with his face fully exposed, and for the first time, in the reflected moonlight off the snow, Lewis could see the creature's physiognomy plainly. Its face was freshly shaved; and the scent of cologne was strong, even in the open air. Its skin was pink as a peach, though nicked in one or two

places by a careless blade. Lewis thought of the open-razor it had apparently threatened Catherine with. Was that what its business had been in Phillipe's room, the purloining of a good razor? It was pulling its leather gloves on over its wide, shaved hands, making small coughing noises in its throat that sounded almost like grunts of satisfaction. Lewis had the impression that it was preparing itself for the outside world; and the sight was touching as much as intimidating. All this thing wanted was to be human. It was aspiring, in its way, to the model Phillipe had given it, had nurtured in it. Now, deprived of its mentor, confused and unhappy, it was attempting to face the world as it had been taught to do. There was no way back for it. Its days of innocence had gone: it could never be an unambitious beast again. Trapped in its new persona, it had no choice but to continue in the life its master had awoken its taste for. Without glancing in Lewis' direction, it gently closed the door behind it and crossed the yard, its walk transforming in those few steps from a simian roll to the mincing waddle that it used to simulate humanity. Then it was gone.

Lewis waited a moment in the shadows, breathing shallowly. Every bone in his body ached with cold now, and his feet were numb. The beast showed no sign of returning; so he ventured out of his hiding place and tried the door. It was not locked. As he stepped inside a stench struck him: the sickly sweet smell of rotten fruit mingled with the cloying cologne: the zoo and the boudoir.

He edged down a flight of slimy stone steps, and along a short, tiled corridor towards a door. It too was unlocked; and the bare bulb inside illuminated a bizarre scene.

On the floor, a large, somewhat thread-bare Persian carpet; sparse furnishings; a bed, roughly covered with blankets and stained hessian; a wardrobe, bulging with oversize clothes; discarded fruit in abundance, some trodden into the floor; a bucket, filled with straw and stinking of droppings. On the wall, a large crucifix. On the mantelpiece a photograph of Catherine, Lewis and Phillipe together in a sunlit past, smiling. At the sink, the creature's shaving kit. Soap, brush, razor. Fresh suds. On the dresser a pile of money, left in careless abundance beside a pile of hypodermics and a collection of small bottles. It was warm in the beast's garret; perhaps the furnace for the house roared in an adjacent cellar. Solal was not there.

Suddenly, a noise.

Lewis turned to the door, expecting the ape to be filling it, teeth

bared, eyes demonic. But he had lost all orientation; the noise was not from the door but from the wardrobe. Behind the pile of clothes there was a movement. "Solal'

Jacques Solal half fell out of the wardrobe, and sprawled across the Persian carpet. His face was disfigured by one foul wound, so that it was all but impossible to find any part of his features that was still Jacques. The creature had taken hold of his lip and pulled his muscle off his bone, as though removing a balaclava.

His exposed teeth chattered away in nervous response to oncoming death; his limbs jangled and shook. But Jacques was already gone. These shudders and jerks were not signs of thought or personality, just the din of passing. Lewis knelt at Solal's side; his stomach was strong. During the war, being a conscientious objector, he had volunteered to serve in the Military Hospital, and there were few transformations of the human body he had not seen in one combination or another. Tenderly, he cradled the body, not noticing the blood. He hadn't loved this man, scarcely cared for him at all, but now all he wanted was to take him away, out of the ape's cage, and find him a human grave. He'd take the photograph too. That was too much, giving the beast a photograph of the three friends together. It made him hate Phillipe more than ever.

He hauled the body off the carpet. It required a gargantuan effort, and the sultry heat in the room, after the chill of the outside world, made him dizzy. He could feel a jittering nervousness in his limbs. His body was close to betraying him, he knew it; close to failing, to losing its coherence and collapsing.

Not here. In God's name, not here.

Maybe he should go now, and find a phone. That would be wise. Call the police, yes… call Catherine, yes, even find somebody in the house to help him. But that would mean leaving Jacques in the lair, for the beast to assault again, and he had become strangely protective of the corpse; he was unwilling to leave it alone. In an anguish of confused feelings, unable to leave Jacques yet unable to move him far, he stood in the middle of the room and did nothing at all. That was best; yes. Nothing at all. Too tired, too weak. Nothing at all was best.

The reverie went on interminably; the old man fixed beyond movement at the crux of his feelings, unable to go forward into the future, or back into the soiled past. Unable to remember. Unable to forget.

Waiting, in a dreamy half-life, for the end of the world.

It came home noisily like a drunken man, and the sound of its opening the outer door stirred Lewis into a slow response. With some difficulty he hauled Jacques into the wardrobe, and hid there himself, with the faceless head in his lap.

There was a voice in the room, a woman's voice. Maybe it wasn't the beast, after all. But no: through the crack of the wardrobe door Lewis could see the beast, and a red-haired young woman with him. She was talking incessantly, the perpetual trivia of a spaced-out mind.

"You've got more; oh you sweetie, oh you dear man, that's wonderful. Look at all this stuff."

She had pills in her hands and was swallowing them like sweets, gleeful as a child at Christmas. "Where did you get all this? OK, if you don't want to tell me, it's fine by me."

Was this Phillipe's doing too, or had the ape stolen the stuff for his own purposes? Did he regularly seduce redheaded prostitutes with drugs?

The girl's grating babble was calming now, as the pills took effect, sedating her, transporting her to a private world. Lewis watched, entranced, as she began to undress.

"It's so… hot…in here."

The ape watched, his back to Lewis. What expression did that shaved face wear? Was there lust in its eyes, or doubt?

The girl's breasts were beautiful, though her body was rather too thin. The young skin was white, the nipples flower pink. She raised her arms over her head and as she stretched the perfect globes rose and flattened slightly. The ape reached a wide hand to her body and tenderly plucked at one of her nipples, rolling it between dark-meat fingers. The girl sighed.

"Shall I… take everything off?"

The monkey grunted.

"You don't say much, do you?"

She shimmied out of her red skirt. Now she was naked but for a pair

of knickers. She lay on the bed stretching again, luxuriating in her body and the welcome heat of the room, not even bothering to look at her admirer. Wedged underneath Solal's body, Lewis began to feel dizzy again. His lower limbs were now completely numb, and he had no feeling in his right arm, which was pressed against the back of the wardrobe, yet he didn't dare move. The ape was capable of anything, he knew that. If he was discovered what might it not choose to do, to him and to the girl?

Every part of his body was now either nerveless, or wracked with pain. In his lap Solal's seeping body seemed to become heavier with every moment. His spine was screaming, and the back of his neck pained him as though pierced with hot knitting-needles. The agony was becoming unbearable; he began to think he would die in this pathetic hiding place, while the ape made love.

The girl sighed, and Lewis looked again at the bed. The ape had its hand between her legs, and she squirmed beneath its ministrations.

"Yes, oh yes," she said again and again, as her lover stripped her completely.

It was too much. The dizziness throbbed through Lewis' cortex. Was this death? The lights in the head, and the whine in the ears?

He closed his eyes, blotting out the sight of the lovers, but unable to shut out the noise. It seemed to go on forever, invading his head. Sighs, laughter, little shrieks.

At last, darkness.

Lewis woke on an invisible rack; his body had been wrenched out of shape by the limitations of his hiding-place. He looked up. The door of the wardrobe was open, and the ape was staring down at him, its mouth attempting a grin. It was naked; and its body was almost entirely shaved. In the cleft of its immense chest a small gold crucifix glinted. Lewis recognized the jewellery immediately. He had bought it for Phillipe in the Champs Elysees just before the war. Now it nestled in a tuft of reddish-orange hair. The beast proffered a hand to Lewis, and he automatically took it. The coarse-palmed grip hauled him from under Solal's body. He couldn't stand straight. His legs were rubbery, his ankles wouldn't support him. The beast took hold of him, and steadied him. His head spinning, Lewis looked down into the wardrobe, where Solal was lying, tucked up like a baby in its womb, face to the wall.

The beast closed the door on the corpse, and helped Lewis to the sink, where he was sick.

"Phillipe?" He dimly realized that the woman was still here: in the bed: just woken after a night of love. "Phillipe: who's this?" She was scrabbling for pills on the table beside the bed. The beast sauntered across and snatched them from her hands.

"Ah… Phillipe… please. Do you want me to go with this one as well? I will if you want. Just give me back the pills."

She gestured towards Lewis.

"I don't usually go with old men."

The ape growled at her. The expression on her face changed, as though for the first time she had an inkling of what this john was. But the thought was too difficult for her drugged mind, and she let it go.

"Please, Phillipe…" she whimpered.

Lewis was looking at the ape. It had taken the photograph from the mantelpiece. Its dark nail was on Lewis' picture. It was smiling. It recognized him, even though forty-odd years had drained so much life from him. "Lewis," it said, finding the word quite easy to say.

The old man had nothing in his stomach to vomit, and no harm left to feel. This was the end of the century, he should be ready for anything. Even to be greeted as a friend of a friend by the shaved beast that loomed in front of him. It would not harm him, he knew that. Probably Phillipe had told the ape about their lives together; made the creature love Catherine and himself as much as it had adored Phillipe.

"Lewis," it said again, and gestured to the woman, (now sitting open-legged on the bed) offering her for his pleasure. Lewis shook his head.

In and out, in and out, part fiction, part fact.

It had come to this; offered a human woman by this naked ape. It was the last, God help him, the very last chapter in the fiction his great uncle had begun. From love to murder back to love again. The love of an ape for a man. He had caused it, with his dreams of fictional heroes, steeped in absolute reason. He had coaxed Phillipe into making real the stories of a lost youth. He was to blame. Not this

poor strutting ape, lost between the jungle and the Stock Exchange; not Phillipe, wanting to be young forever; certainly not cold Catherine, who after tonight would be completely alone. It was him. His the crime, his the guilt, his the punishment.

His legs had regained a little feeling, and he began to stagger to the door.

"Aren't you staying?" said the red-haired woman.

"This thing…" he couldn't bring himself to name the animal.

"You mean Phillipe?"

"He isn't called Phillipe," Lewis said. "He's not even human."

"Please yourself," she said, and shrugged.

To his back, the ape spoke, saying his name. But this time, instead of it coming out as a sort of grunt-word, its simian palate caught Phillipe's inflexion with unnerving accuracy, better than the most skilful of parrots. It was Phillipe's voice, perfectly.

"Lewis," it said.

Not pleading. Not demanding. Simply naming, for the pleasure of naming, an equal.

The passers-by who saw the old man clamber on to the parapet of the Pont du Carrousel stared, but made no attempt to stop him jumping. He teetered a moment as he stood up straight, then pitched over into the threshing, churning ice-water.

One or two people wandered to the other side of the bridge to see if the current had caught him: it had. He rose to the surface, his face blue-white and blank as a baby's, then some intricate eddy snatched at his feet and pulled him under. The thick water closed over his head and churned on.

"Who was that?" somebody asked.

"Who knows?"

It was a clear-heaven day; the last of the winter's snow had fallen, and the thaw would begin by noon. Birds, exulting in the sudden sun, swooped over the Sacrй Coeur. Paris began to undress for spring, its virgin white too spoiled to be worn for long.

In mid-morning, a young woman with red hair, her arm linked in that of a large ugly man, took a leisurely stroll to the steps of the Sacre Coeur. The sun blessed them. Bells rang.

It was a new day.

XII: SON OF CELLULOID

Barberio felt fine, despite the bullet.

Sure, there was a catch in his chest if he breathed too hard, and the wound in his thigh wasn't too pretty to look at, but he'd been holed before and come up smiling. At least he was free: that was the main thing. Nobody, he swore, nobody would ever lock him up again, he'd kill himself rather than be taken back into custody. If he was unlucky and they cornered him, he'd stick the gun in his mouth and blow off the top of his head. No way would they drag him back to that cell alive.

Life was too long if you were locked away and counting it in seconds. It had only taken him a couple of months to learn that lesson. Life was long, and repetitive and debilitating, and if you weren't careful you were soon thinking it would be better to die than go on existing in the shit-hole they'd put you in. Better to string yourself up by your belt in the middle of the night rather than face the tedium of another twenty-four hours, all eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds of it.

So he went for broke.

First he bought a gun on the prison black market. It cost him everything he had and a handful of lOUs he'd have to make good on the outside if he wanted to stay alive. Then he made the most obvious move in the book: he climbed the wall. And whatever god looked after the liquor-store muggers of this world was looking after him that night, because hot damn if he didn't scoot right over that wall and away without so much as a dog sniffing at his heels.

And the cops? Why they screwed it up every which way from Sunday, looking for him where he'd never gone, pulling in his brother and his sister-in-law on suspicion of harbouring him when they didn't even know he'd escaped, putting out an All-Points Bulletin with a description of his pre-prison self, twenty pounds heavier than he was now. All this he'd heard from Geraldine, a lady he'd courted in the good old days, who'd given him a dressing for his leg and the bottle of Southern Comfort that was now almost empty in his pocket. He'd taken the booze and sympathy and gone on his way, trusting to the legendary idiocy of the law and the god who'd got him so far already.

Sing-Sing he called this god. Pictured him as a fat guy with a grin

that hooked from one ear to the other, a prime salami in one hand, and a cup of dark coffee in the other. In Barberio's mind Sing-Sing smelt like a full belly at Mama's house, back in the days when Mama was still well in the head, and he'd been her pride and joy.

Unfortunately Sing-Sing had been looking the other way when the one eagle eye cop in the whole city saw Barberio draining his snake in a back alley, and recognised him from that obsolete APB. Young cop, couldn't have been more than twenty-five, out to be a hero. He was too dumb to learn the lesson of Barberio's warning shot. Instead of taking cover, and letting Barberio make a break, he'd forced the issue by coming straight down the alley at him.

Barberio had no choice. He fired.

The cop fired back. Sing-Sing must have stepped in there somewhere, spoiling the cop's aim so that the bullet that should have found Barberio's heart hit his leg, and guiding the returning shot straight into the cop's nose. Eagle-eye went down as if he'd just remembered an appointment with the ground, and Barberio was away, cursing, bleeding and scared. He'd never shot a man before, and he'd started with a cop. Quite an introduction to the craft.

Sing-Sing was still with him though. The bullet in his leg ached, but Geraldine's ministrations had stopped the blood, the liquor had done wonders for the pain, and here he was half a day later, tired but alive, having hopped half-way across a city so thick with vengeful cops it was like a psycho's parade at the Policemen's Ball. Now all he asked of his protector was a place to rest up awhile. Not for long, just enough time to catch his breath and plan his future movements. An hour or two of shut-eye wouldn't go miss either.

Thing was, he'd got that belly-ache, the deep, gnawing pain he got more and more these days. Maybe he'd find a phone, when he'd rested for a time, and call Geraldine again, get her to sweet-talk a doctor into seeing him. He'd been planning to get out of the city before midnight, but that didn't look like a plausible option now. Dangerous as it was, he would have to stay in the locality a night and maybe the best part of the next day; make his break for the open country when he'd recouped a little energy and had the bullet taken out of his leg.

Jeez, but that belly griped. His guess was it was an ulcer, brought on by the filthy slop they called food at the penitentiary. Lots of guys had belly and shit-chute problems in there. He'd be better after a few days of pizzas and beers, he was damn sure of that.

The word cancer wasn't in Barberio's vocabulary. He never thought about terminal disease, especially in reference to himself. That'd be like a piece of slaughterhouse beef fretting about an in growing hoof as it stepped up to meet the gun. A man in his trade, surrounded by lethal tools, doesn't expect to perish from a malignancy in his belly. But that's what that ache was.

The lot at the back of the Movie Palace cinema had been a restaurant, but a fire had gutted it three years back, and the ground had never been cleared.

It wasn't a good spec for rebuilding, and no-one had shown much interest in the site. The neighbourhood bad once been buzzing, but that was in the sixties, early seventies. For a heady decade places of entertainment-restaurants, bars, cinemas-had flourished. Then came the inevitable slump. Fewer and fewer kids came this way to spend their money: there were new spots to hit, new places to be seen in. The bars closed up, the restaurants followed. Only the Movie Palace remained as a token reminder of more innocent days in a district that was becoming tackier and more dangerous every year.

The jungle of convolvulus and rotted timbers that throttled the vacant lot suited Barberio just fine. His leg was giving him jip, he was stumbling from sheer fatigue, and the pain in his belly was worsening. A spot to lay down his clammy head was needed, and damn quick. Finish off the Southern Comfort, and think about Geraldine.

It was one-thirty am; the lot was a trysting-ground for cats. They ran, startled, through the man-high weeds as he pushed aside some of the fencing timbers and slid into the shadows. The refuge stank of piss, human and cat, of garbage, of old fires, but it felt like a sanctuary.

Seeking the support of the back wall of the Movie Palace, Barberio leaned on his forearm and threw up a bellyful of Southern Comfort and acid. Along the wall a little way some kids had built a makeshift den of girders, fire-blackened planks and corrugated iron. Ideal, he thought, a sanctuary within a sanctuary. Sing-Sing was smiling at him, all greasy chops. Groaning a little (the belly was really bad tonight) he staggered along the wall to the lean-to den, and ducked through the door.

Somebody else had used this place to sleep in: he could feel damp sacking under his hand as he sat down, and a bottle clinked against a brick somewhere to his left. There was a smell close by he didn't want

to think too much about, like the sewers were backing up. All in all, it was squalid: but it was safer than the street. He sat with his back against the wall of the Movie Palace and exhaled his fears in a long, slow breath.

No more than a block away, perhaps half a block, the babe-in-the-night wail of a cop-car began, and his newly acquired sense of security sank without trace. They were closing in for the kill, he knew it. They'd just been playing him along, letting him think he was away, all the time cruising him like sharks, sleek and silent, until he was too tired to put up any resistance. Jeez: he'd killed a cop, what they wouldn't do to him once they had him alone. They'd crucify him.

OK Sing-Sing, what now? Take that surprised look off your face, and get me out of this.

For a moment, nothing. Then the god smiled in his mind's eye, and quite coincidentally he felt the hinges pressing into his back.

Shit! A door. He was leaning against a door.

Grunting with pain he turned and ran his fingers around this escape hatch at his back. To judge by touch it was a small ventilation grille no more than three feet square. Maybe it let on to a crawlspace or maybe into someone's kitchen – what the hell? It was safer inside than out: that was the first lesson any newborn kid got slapped into him.

The siren-song wailed on, making Barberio's skin creep. Foul sound. It quickened his heart hearing it.

His thick fingers fumbled down the side of the grille feeling for a lock of some kind, and sure as shit there was a padlock, as gritty with rust as the rest of the metal work.

Come on Sing-Sing, he prayed, one more break is all I'm asking, let me in, and I swear I'm yours forever. He pulled at the lock, but damn it, it wasn't about to give so easily. Either it was stronger than it felt, or he was weaker. Maybe a little of both.

The car was slinking closer with every second. The wail drowned out the sound of his own panicking breath.

He pulled the gun, the cop-killer, out of his jacket-pocket and pressed it into service as a snub-nosed crowbar. He couldn't get much leverage on the thing, it was too short, but a couple of cursing heaves did the trick. The lock gave, a shower of rust scales peppered his face.

He only just silenced a whoop of triumph.

Now to open the grille, to get out of this wretched world into the dark.

He insinuated his fingers through the lattice and pulled. Pain, a continuum of pain that ran from his belly to his bowel to his leg, made his head spin. Open, damn you, he said to the grille, open sesame.

The door conceded.

It opened suddenly, and he fell back on to the sodden sacking. A moment and he was up again, peering into the darkness within this darkness that was the interior of the Movie Palace.

Let the cop-car come, he thought buoyantly, I've got my hidey-hole to keep me warm. And warm it was: almost hot in fact. The air out of the hole smelt like it had been simmering in there for a good long while.

His leg had gone into a cramp and it hurt like fuck as he dragged himself through the door and into the solid black beyond. Even as he did so the siren turned a corner nearby and the baby wail died. Wasn't that the patter of law like feet he could hear on the sidewalk?

He turned clumsily in the blackness, his leg a dead-weight, his foot feeling about the size of a watermelon, and pulled the grille-door to after him. The satisfaction was that of pulling up a drawbridge and leaving the enemy on the other side of the moat, somehow it didn't matter that they could open the door just as easily as he had, and follow him in. Childlike, he felt sure nobody could possibly find him here. As long as he couldn't see his pursuers, his pursuers couldn't see him.

If the cops did indeed duck into the lot to look for him, he didn't hear them. Maybe he'd been mistaken, maybe they were after some other poor punk on the street, and not him. Well OK, whatever. He had found himself a nice niche to rest up awhile, and that was fine and dandy.

Funny, the air wasn't so bad in here after all. It wasn't the stagnant air of a crawlspace or an attic, the atmosphere in the hidey-hole was alive. Not fresh air, no it wasn't that, it smelt old and trapped sure enough, but it was buzzing nevertheless. It fairly sang in his ears, it made his skin tingle like a cold shower, it wormed its way up his nose

and put the weirdest things in his head. It was like being high on something: he felt that good. His leg didn't hurt anymore, or if it did he was too distracted by the pictures in his head. He was filling up to overflowing with pictures: dancing girls and kissing couples, farewells at stations, old dark houses, comedians, cowboys, undersea adventures -scenes he'd never lived in a million years, but that moved him now like raw experience, true and incontestable. He wanted to cry at the farewells, except that he wanted to laugh at the comedians, except that the girls needed ogling, the cowboys needed hollering for.

What kind of place was this anyhow? He peered through the glamour of the pictures which were damn close to getting the better of his eyes. He was in a space no more than four feet wide, but tall, and lit by a flickering light that chanced through cracks in the inner wall. Barberio was too befuddled to recognise the origins of the light, and his murmuring ears couldn't make sense of the dialogue from the screen on the other side of the wall. It was "Satyricon', the second of the two Fellini movies the Palace was showing as their late-night double feature that Saturday.

Barberio had never seen the movie, never even heard of Fellini. It would have disgusted him (faggot film, Italian crap). He preferred undersea adventures, war movies. Oh, and dancing girls. Anything with dancing girls.

Funny, though he was all alone in his hidey-hole, he had the weird sensation of being watched. Through the kaleidoscope of Busby Berkeley routines that was playing on the inside of his skull he felt eyes, not a few – thousands – watching him. The feeling wasn't so bad you'd want to take a drink for it, but they were always there, staring away at him like he was something worth looking at, laughing at him sometimes, crying sometimes, but mostly just gawping with hungry eyes.

Truth was, there was nothing he could do about them anyhow. His limbs had given up the ghost; he couldn't feel his hands or feet at all. He didn't know, and it was probably better that he didn't, that he'd torn open his wound getting into this place, and he was bleeding to death.

About two-fifty-five am, as Fellini's "Satyricon' came to its ambiguous end, Barberio died in the space between the back of the building proper and the back wall of the cinema.

The Movie Palace had once been a Mission Hall, and if he'd looked

up as he died he might have glimpsed the inept fresco depicting an Angelic Host that was still to be seen through the grime, and assumed his own Assumption. But he died watching the dancing girls, and that was fine by him.

The false wall, the one that let through the light from the back of the screen, had been erected as a makeshift partition to cover the fresco of the Host. It had seem more respectful to do that than paint the Angels out permanently, and besides the man who had ordered the alterations half-suspected that the movie house bubble would burst sooner or later. If so, he could simply demolish the wall, and he'd be back in business for the worship of God instead of Garbo.

It never happened. The bubble, though fragile, never burst, and the movies carried on. The Doubting Thomas (his name was Harry Cleveland) died, and the space was forgotten. Nobody now living even knew it existed. If he'd searched the city from top to bottom Barberio couldn't have found a more secret place to perish.

The space however, the air itself, had lived a life of its own in that fifty years. Like a reservoir, it had received the electric stares of thousands of eyes, of tens of thousands of eyes. Half a century of movie-goers had lived vicariously through the screen of the Movie Palace, pressing their sympathies and their passions on to the flickering illusion, the energy of their emotions gathering strength like a neglected cognac in that hidden passage of air. Sooner or later, it must discharge itself. All it lacked was a catalyst.

Until Barberio's cancer.

TWO: THE MAIN FEATURE

After loitering in the cramped foyer of the Movie Palace for twenty minutes or so, the young girl in the cerise and lemon print dress began to look distinctly agitated. It was almost three in the morning, and the late-night movies were well over.

Eight months had passed since Barberio had died in the back of the cinema, eight slow months in which business had been at best patchy. Still, the late-night double bill on Fridays and Saturdays always packed in the punters. Tonight it had been two Eastwood movies: spaghetti westerns. The girl in the cerise dress didn't look like much of a western fan to Birdy; it wasn't really a women's genre. Maybe she'd come for Eastwood rather than the violence, though Birdy had never seen the attraction of that eternally squinting face.

"Can I help you?" Birdy asked.

The girl looked nervously at Birdy.

"I'm waiting for my boyfriend," she said. "Dean."

"Have you lost him?"

"He went to the rest-room at the end of the movie and he hasn't come out yet."

"Was he feeling… er… ill?"

"Oh no," said the girl quickly, protecting her date from this slight on his sobriety.

I'll get someone to go and look for him," said Birdy. It was late, she was tired, and the speed was wearing off. The idea of spending any more time than she strictly needed to in this fleapit was not particularly appealing. She wanted home; bed and sleep. Just sleep. At thirty-four, she'd decided she'd grown out of sex. Bed was for sleep, especially for fat girls.

She pushed the swing door, and poked her head into the cinema. A ripe smell of cigarettes, popcorn and people enveloped her; it was a few degrees hotter in here than in the foyer.

"Ricky?"

Ricky was locking up the back exit, at the far end of the cinema.

"That smell's completely gone," he called to her.

"Good." A few months back there'd been a hell of a stench at the screen-end of the cinema.

"Something dead in the lot next door," he said.

"Can you help me a minute?" she called back.

"What'd you want?"

He sauntered up the red-carpeted aisle towards her, keys jangling at his belt. His tee-shirt proclaimed "Only the Young Die Good'.

"Problem?" he said, blowing his nose.

"There's a girl out here. She says she lost her boyfriend in the John. "Ricky looked pained.

"In the John?"

"Right. Will you take a look? You don't mind, do you?"

And she could cut out the wisecracks for a start, he thought, giving her a sickly smile. They were hardly on speaking terms these days. Too many high times together: it always dealt a crippling blow to a friendship in the long run. Besides, Birdy'd made some very uncharitable (accurate) remarks about his associates and he'd returned the salvo with all guns blazing. They hadn't spoken for three and a half weeks after that. Now there was an uncomfortable truce, more for sanity's sake than anything. It was not meticulously observed.

He about turned, wandered back down the aisle, and took rowe across the cinema to the John, pushing up seats as he went. They'd seen better days, those seats: sometime around "Now Voyager'. Now they looked thoroughly shot at: in need of refurbishing, or replacing altogether. In rowe alone four of the seats had been slashed beyond repair, now he counted a fifth mutilation which was new tonight. Some mindless kid bored with the movie and/or his girlfriend, and too stoned to leave. Time was he'd done that kind of thing himself: and counted it a blow for freedom against the capitalists who ran these joints. Time was he'd done a lot of damn-fool things.

Birdy watched him duck into the Men's Room. He'll get a kick out of that, she thought with a sly smile, just his sort of occupation. And to think, she'd once had the hots for him, back in the old days (six months ago) when razor-thin men with noses like Durante and an encyclopedic knowledge of de Niro movies had really been her style. Now she saw him for what he was, flotsam from a lost ship of hope. Still a pill-freak, still a theoretical bisexual, still devoted to early Polanski movies and symbolic pacifism. What kind of dope did he have between his ears anyhow? The same as she'd had, she chided herself, thinking there was something sexy about the bum.

She waited for a few seconds, watching the door. When he failed to re-emerge she went back into the foyer for a moment, to see how the girl was going on. She was smoking a cigarette like an amateur actress who's failed to get the knack of it, leaning against the rail, her skirt hitched up as she scratched her leg.

"Tights," she explained.

The Manager's gone to find Dean.'"Thanks," she scratched on. "They bring me out in a rash, I'm allergic to them."

There were blotches on the girl's pretty legs, which rather spoiled the effect.

"It's because I'm hot and bothered," she ventured. "Whenever I get hot and bothered, I get allergic."

"Oh."

"Dean's probably run off, you know, when I had my back turned. He'd do that. He doesn't give a f-. He doesn't care."

Birdy could see she was on her way to tears, which was a drag. She was bad with tears. Shouting matches, even fights, OK. Tears, no go.

"It'll be OK' was all she could find to say to keep the tears from coming.

"No it's not," said the girl. "It won't be OK, because he's a bastard. He treats everyone like dirt." She ground out the half-smoked cigarette with the pointed toe of her cerise shoes, taking particular care to extinguish every glowing fragment of tobacco.

"Men don't care, do they?" she said looking up at Birdy with heart-melting directness. Under the expert make-up, she was perhaps seventeen, certainly not much more. Her mascara was a little smeared, and there were arcs of tiredness under her eyes.

"No," replied Birdy, speaking from painful experience. "No they don't."

Birdy thought ruefully that she'd never looked as attractive as this tired nymphet. Her eyes were too small, and her arms were fat. (Be honest, girl, you're fat all over.) But the arms were her worst feature, she'd convinced herself of that. There were men, a lot of them, who got off on big breasts, on a sizeable ass, but no man she'd ever known liked fat arms. They always wanted to be able to encircle the wrist of their girlfriend between thumb and index finger, it was a primitive way to measure attachment. Her wrists, however, if she was brutal with herself, were practically indiscernible. Her fat hands became her fat fore-arms, which became, after a podgy time, her fat upper arms. Men couldn't encircle her wrists because she had no wrists, and that alienated them. Well, that was one of the reasons anyhow. She was also very bright: and that was always a drawback if you wanted men

at your feet. But of the options as to why she'd never been successful in love, she plumped for the fat arms as the likeliest explanation. Whereas this girl had arms as slender as a Balinese dancer's, her wrists looked thin as glass, and about as fragile.

Sickening, really. She was probably a lousy conversationalist to boot. God, the girl had all the advantages.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Lindi Lee," the girl replied.

It would be.

Ricky thought he'd made a mistake. This can't be the toilet, he said to himself.

He was standing in what appeared to be the main street of a frontier town he'd seen in two hundred westerns. A dust storm seemed to be raging, forcing him to narrow his eyes against the stinging sand. Through the swirl of the ochre-grey air he could pick out, he thought, the General Stores, the Sheriff's Office and the Saloon. They stood in lieu of the toilet cubicles. Optional tumble-weed danced by him on the hot desert wind. The ground beneath his feet was impacted sand: no sign of tiles. No sign of anything that was faintly toilet-like.

Ricky looked to his right, down the street. Where the far wall of the John should have been the street receded, in forced perspective, towards a painted distance. It was a lie, of course, the whole thing was a lie. Surely if he concentrated he'd begin to see through the mirage to find out how it had been achieved; the projections, the concealed lighting effects, the backcloths, the miniatures; all the tricks of the trade. But though he concentrated as hard as his slightly spaced-out condition would allow, he just couldn't seem to get his fingers under the edge of the illusion to strip it back.

The wind just went on blowing, the tumble-weed tumbled on. Somewhere in the storm a barn-door was slamming, opening and slamming again in the gusts. He could even smell horse-shit. The effect was so damn perfect, he was breathless with admiration.

But whoever had created this extraordinary set had proved their point. He was impressed: now it was time to stop the game.

He turned back to the toilet door. It was gone. A wall of dust had erased it, and suddenly he was lost and alone.

The barn-door kept slamming. Voices called to each other in the worsening storm. Where was the Saloon and the Sheriff's office? They too had been obscured. Ricky tasted something he hadn't experienced since childhood: the panic of losing the hand of a guardian. In this case the lost parent was his sanity. Somewhere to his left a shot sounded in the depths of the storm, and he heard something whistle in his ear, then felt a sharp pain. Gingerly he raised his hand to his ear-lobe and touched the place that hurt. Part of his ear had been shot away, a neat nick in his lobe. His ear-stud was gone, and there was blood, real blood, on his fingers. Someone had either just missed blowing off his head or was really playing silly fuckers.

"Hey, man," he appealed into the teeth of this wretched fiction, whirling around on his heel to see if he could locate the aggressor. But he could see no one. The dust had totally enclosed him: he couldn't move backwards or forwards with any safety. The gunman might be very close, waiting for him to step in his direction.

"I don't like this," he said aloud, hoping the real world would hear him somehow, and step in to salvage his tattered mind. He rummaged in his jeans pocket for a pill or two, anything to improve the situation, but he was all out of instant sunshine, not even a lowly Valium was to be found lurking in the seam of his pocket. He felt naked. What a time to be lost in the middle of Zane Grey's nightmares.

A second shot sounded, but this time there was no whistling. Ricky was certain this meant he'd been shot, but as there was neither pain nor blood it was difficult to be sure.

Then he heard the unmistakable flap of the saloon door, and the groan of another human being somewhere near. A tear opened up in the storm for a moment. Did he see the saloon through it, and a young man stumbling out, leaving behind him a painted world of tables, mirrors, and gunslingers? Before he could focus properly the tear was sewn up with sand, and he doubted the sight. Then, shockingly, the young man he'd come looking for was there, a foot away, blue-lipped with death, and falling forward into Ricky's arms. He wasn't dressed for a part in this movie anymore than Ricky was. His bomber jacket was a fair copy of a fifties style, his tee-shirt bore the smiling face of Mickey Mouse.

Mickey's left eye was bloodshot, and still bleeding. The bullet had unerringly found the young man's heart.

He used his last breath to ask: "What the fuck is going on?" and

died.

As last words went, it lacked style, but it was deeply felt. Ricky stared into the young man's frozen face for a moment, then the dead weight in his arms became too much, and he had no choice but to drop him. As the body hit the ground the dust seemed to turn into piss-stained tiling for an instant. Then the fiction took precedence again, and the dust swirled, and the tumble-weed tumbled, and he was standing in the middle of Main Street, Deadwood Gulch, with a body at his feet.

Ricky felt something very like cold turkey in his system. His limbs began a St Virus' dance, and the urge to piss came on him, very strong. Another half-minute, he'd wet his pants.

Somewhere, he thought, somewhere in this wild world, there is a urinal. There is a graffiti-covered wall, with numbers for the sex-crazed to call, with "This is not a fallout shelter' scrawled on the tiles, and a cluster of obscene drawings. There are water-tanks and paperless toilet-roll holders and broken seats. There is the squalid smell of piss and old farts. Find it in God's name find the real thing before the fiction does you some permanent damage.

If, for the sake of argument, the Saloon and the General Stores are the toilet cubicles, then the urinal must be behind me, he reasoned. So step back. It can't do you any more harm than staying here in the middle of the street while someone takes potshots at you.

Two steps, two cautious steps, and he found only air. But on the third – well, well, what have we here? – his hand touched a cold tile surface.

"Whoe-ee!" he said. It was the urinal: and touching it was like finding gold in a pan of trash. Wasn't that the sickly smell of disinfectant wafting up from the gutter? It was, oh boy, it was.

Still whooping, he unzipped and started to relieve the ache in his bladder, splashing his feet in his haste. What the hell: he had this illusion beat. If he turned round now he'd find the fantasy dispersed, surely. The saloon, the dead boy, the storm, all would be gone. It was some chemical throw-back, bad dope lingering in his system and playing dumb-ass games with his imagination. As he shook the last drops on to his blue suedes, he heard the hero of this movie speak.

"What you doin' pissin' in mah street, boy?"

It was John Wayne's voice, accurate to the last slurred syllable, and it was just behind him. Ricky couldn't even contemplate turning round. The guy would blow off his head for sure. It was in the voice, that threatful ease that warned: I'm ready to draw, so do your worst. The cowboy was armed, and all Ricky had in his hand was his dick, which was no match for a gun even if he'd been better hung.

Very cautiously he tucked his weapon away and zipped himself up, then raised his hands. In front of him the wavering image of the toilet wall had disappeared again. The storm howled: his ear bled down his neck.

"OK boy, I want you to take off that gunbelt and drop it to the ground. You hear me?" said Wayne.

"Yes."

"Take it nice and slow, and keep those hands where I can see them."

Boy, this guy was really into it.

Nice and slow, like the man said, Ricky unbuckled his belt, pulled it through the loops in his jeans and dropped it to the-floor. The keys should have jangled as they hit the tiles, he hoped to God they would. No such luck. There was a clinking thud that was the sound of metal on sand.

"OK," said Wayne. "Now you're beginning to behave. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry?" said Ricky lamely.

"Sorry?"

"For pissing in the street."

"I don't reckon sorry is sufficient penitence," said Wayne.

"But really I am. It was all a mistake."

"We've had about enough of you strangers around these parts. Found that kid with his trousers round his ankles takin' a dump in the middle of the saloon. Well I call that uncouth! Where's you sons of bitches been educated anyhow? It that what they're teaching you in them fancy schools out East?"

"I can't apologise enough."

"Damn right you can't' Wayne drawled. "You with the kid?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"What kind of fancy-talk is that?" he jabbed his gun in Rick's back: it felt very real indeed. "Are you with him or not?"

"I just meant -”

"You don't mean nothing in this territory, mister, you take that from me."

He cocked the gun, audibly.

"Why don't you turn round, son and lets us see what you're made of?"Ricky had seen this routine before. The man turns, he goes for a concealed gun, and Wayne shoots him. No debate, no time to discuss the ethics of it, a bullet would do the job better than words.

Turn round I said."

Very slowly, Ricky turned to face the survivor of a thousand shootouts, and there was the man himself, or rather a brilliant impersonation of him. A middle period Wayne, before he'd grown fat and sick-looking. A Rio Grande Wayne, dusty from the long trail and squinting from a lifetime of looking at the horizon. Ricky had never had a taste for Westerns. He hated all the forced machismo, the glorification of dirt and cheap heroism. His generation had put flowers in rifle-barrels, and he'd thought that was a nice thing to do at the time; still did, in fact.

This face, so mock-manly, so uncompromising, personified a handful of lethal lies – about the glory of America's frontier origins, the morality of swift justice, the tenderness in the heart of brutes. Ricky hated the face. His hands just itched to hit it.

Fuck it, if the actor, whoever he was, was going to shoot him anyway, what was to be lost by putting his fist in the bastard's face? The thought became the act: Ricky made a fist, swung and his knuckles connected with Wayne's chin. The actor was slower than his screen image. He failed to dodge the blow, and Ricky took the opportunity to knock the gun out of Wayne's hand. He then followed through with a barrage of punches to the body, just as he'd seen in the movies. It was a spectacular display.

The bigger man reeled backwards under the blows, and tripped, his

spur catching in the dead boy's hair. He lost his balance and fell in the dust, bested.

The bastard was down! Ricky felt a thrill he'd never tasted before; the exhilaration of physical triumph. My God! He'd brought down the greatest cowboy in the world. His critical faculties were overwhelmed by the victory.

The dust-storm suddenly thickened. Wayne was still on the floor, splattered with blood from a smashed nose and a broken lip. The sand was already obscuring him, a curtain drawn across the shame of his defeat.

"Get up," Ricky demanded, trying to capitalise on the situation before the opportunity was lost entirely.

Wayne seemed to grin as the storm covered him.

"Well boy," he leered, rubbing his chin, “we'll make a man of you yet…"Then his body was eroded by the driving dust, and momentarily something else was there in its place, a form Ricky could make no real sense of. A shape that was and was not Wayne, which deteriorated rapidly towards inhumanity.

The dust was already a furious bombardment, filling ears and eyes. Ricky stumbled away from the scene of the fight, choking, and miraculously he found a wall, a door, and before he could make sense of where he was the roaring storm had spat him out into the silence of the Movie Palace.

There, though he'd promised himself to butch it up since he'd grown a moustache, he gave a small cry that would not have shamed Fay Wray, and collapsed.

In the foyer Lindi Lee was telling Birdy why she didn't like films very much.

"I mean, Dean likes cowboy movies. I don't really like any of that stuff. I guess I shouldn't say that to you -”

"No, that's OK."

" – But I mean you must really love movies, I guess. "Cause you work here."

"I like some movies. Not everything."

"Oh." She seemed surprised. A lot of things seemed to surprise her. "I like wild-life movies, you know."

"Yes…"

"You know? Animals… and stuff."

"Yes…" Birdy remembered her guess about Lindi Lee, that she wasn't much of a conversationalist. Got it in one.

"I wonder what's keeping them?" said Lindi.

The lifetime Ricky had been living in the dust-storm had lasted no more than two minutes in real time. But then in the movies time was elastic.

I'll go look," Birdy ventured.

"He's probably left without me," Lindi said again.

"We'll find out."

Thanks."

"Don't fret," said Birdy, lightly putting her hand on the girl's thin arm as she passed. "I'm sure everything's OK."

She disappeared through the swing doors into the cinema, leaving Lindi Lee alone in the foyer. Lindi sighed. Dean wasn't the first boy who'd run out on her, just because she wouldn't produce the goods. Lindi had her own ideas about when and how she'd go all the way with a boy; this wasn't the time and Dean wasn't the boy. He was too slick, too shifty, and his hair smelt of diesel oil. If he had run out on her, she wasn't going to weep buckets over the loss. As her mother always said, there were plenty more fish in the sea.

She was staring at the poster for next week's attraction when she heard a thump behind her, and there was a pie-bald rabbit, a fat, dozy sweetheart of a thing, sitting in the middle of the foyer staring up at her.

"Hello," she said to the rabbit.

The rabbit licked itself adorably.

Lindi Lee loved animals; she loved True Life Adventure Movies in which creatures were filmed in their native habitat to tunes from

Rossini, and scorpions did square-dances while mating, and every bear-cub was lovingly called a little scamp. She lapped up that stuff. But most of all she loved rabbits.

The rabbit took a couple of hops towards her. She knelt to stroke it. It was warm and its eyes were round and pink. It hopped past her up the stairs.

"Oh I don't think you should go up there," she said.

For one thing it was dark at the top of the stairs. For another there was a sign that read "Private. Staff only' on the wall. But the rabbit seemed determined, and the clever mite kept well ahead of her as she followed it up the stairs.

At the top it was pitch black, and the rabbit had gone.

Something else was sitting there in the rabbit's place, its eyes burning bright.

With Lindi Lee illusions could be simple. No need to seduce her into a complete fiction like the boy, this one was already dreaming. Easy meat.

"Hello," Lindi Lee said, scared a little by the presence ahead of her. She looked into the dark, trying to sort out some outline, a hint of a face. But there was none. Not even a breath.

She took one step back down the stairs but it reached for her suddenly, and caught her before she toppled, silencing her quickly, intimately.

This one might not have much passion to steal, but it sensed another use here. The tender body was still budding: the orifices unused to invasions. It took Lindi up the few remaining stairs and sealed her away for future investigation.

"Ricky? Oh God, Ricky!"

Birdy knelt beside Ricky's body and shook him. At least he was still breathing, that was something, and though at first sight there seemed to be a great deal of blood, in fact the wound was merely a nick in his ear.

She shook him again, more roughly, but there was no response. After a frantic search she found his pulse: it was strong and regular.

Obviously he'd been attacked by somebody, possibly Lindi Lee's absent boyfriend. In which case, where was he? Still in the John perhaps, armed and dangerous. There was no way she was going to be damn fool enough to step in there and have a look, she'd seen that routine too many times. Woman in Peril: standard stuff. The darkened room, the stalking beast. Well, instead of walking bang into that clichй she was going to do what she silently exhorted heroines to do time and again: defy her curiosity and call the cops.

Leaving Ricky where he lay, she walked up the aisle, and back into the foyer.

It was empty. Lindi Lee had either given up on her boyfriend altogether, or found somebody else on the street outside to take her home. Whichever, she'd closed the front door behind her as she left, leaving only a hint of Johnson's Baby Powder on the air behind her. OK, that certainly made things easier, Birdy thought, as she stepped into the Ticket Office to dial the cops. She was rather pleased to think that the girl had found the commonsense to give up on her lousy date.

She picked up the receiver, and immediately somebody spoke.

"Hello there," said the voice, nasal and ingratiating, “it's a little late at night to be using the phone, isn't it?"

It wasn't the operator, she was sure. She hadn't even punched a number.

Besides, it sounded like Peter Loire.

"Who is this?"

"Don't you recognise me?"

"I want to speak to the police."

"I'd like to oblige, really I would."

"Get off the line, will you? This is an emergency! I need the police."

"I heard you first time," the whine went on.

"Who are you?"

"You already played that line.'" There's somebody hurt in here. Will you please -”

"Poor Rick."

He knew the name. Poor Rick, he said, as though he was a loving friend.

She felt the sweat begin in her brow: felt it sprout out of her pores. He knew Ricky's name.

"Poor, poor Rick," the voice said again. "Still I'm sure we'll have a happy ending. Aren't you?"

"This is a matter of life and death," Birdy insisted, impressed by how controlled she felt sure she was sounding.

"I know," said Lorre. "Isn't it exciting?"

"Damn you! Get off this phone! Or so help me -”

"So help you what? What can a fat girl like you hope to do in a situation like this, except blubber?"

"You fucking creep."

"My pleasure."

"Do I know you?"

"Yes and no," the tone of the voice was wavering.

"You're a friend of Ricky's, is that it?" One of the dope-fiends he used to hang out with. Kind of idiot-game they'd get up'to. All right, you've had your stupid little joke," she said, “now get off the line before you do some serious harm."

"You're harassed," the voice said, softening. "I understand…" it was changing magically, sliding up an octave, “you're trying to help the man you love…"its tone was feminine now, the accent altering, the slime becoming a purr. And suddenly it was Garbo.

"Poor Richard," she said to Birdy. "He's tried so hard, hasn't he?" She was gentle as a lamb.

Birdy was speechless: the impersonation was as faultless as that of Lorre, as female as the first had been male.

"All right, I'm impressed," said Birdy, "now let me speak to the cops."

"Wouldn't this be a fine and lovely night to go out walking, Birdy? Just we two girls together."

"You know my name."

"Of course I know your name. I'm very close to you."

"What do you mean, close to me?"

The reply was throaty laughter, Garbo's lovely laughter.

Birdy couldn't take it anymore. The trick was too clever; she could feel herself succumbing to the impersonation, as though she were speaking to the star herself. "No," she said down the phone, “you don't convince me, you hear?" Then her temper snapped. She yelled: "You're a fake!" into the mouthpiece of the phone so loudly she felt the receiver tremble, and then slammed it down. She opened the Office and went to the outer door. Lindi Lee had not simply slammed the door behind her. It was locked and bolted from the inside.

"Shit," Birdy said quietly.

Suddenly the foyer seemed smaller than she'd previously thought it, and so did her reserve of cool. She mentally slapped herself across the face, the standard response for a heroine verging on hysteria. Think this through, she instructed herself. One: the door was locked. Lindi Lee hadn't done it, Ricky couldn't have done it, she certainly hadn't done it. Which implied Two: There was a weirdo in here. Maybe the same he, she or it that was on the phone. Which implied Three: He, she or it must have access to another line, somewhere in the building. The only one she knew of was upstairs, in the storeroom. But there was no way she was going up there. For reasons see Heroine in Peril. Which implied Four: She had to open this door with Ricky's keys.

Right, there was the imperative: get the keys from Ricky.

She stepped back into the cinema. For some reason the house-lights were jumpy, or was that just panic in her optic nerve? No, they were flickering slightly; the whole interior seemed to be fluctuating, as though it were breathing.

Ignore it: fetch the keys.

She raced down the aisle, aware, as she always was when she ran, that her breasts were doing a jig, her buttocks too. A right sight I look, she thought for anyone with the eyes to see. Ricky, was moaning in

his faint. Birdy looked for the keys, but his belt had disappeared.

"Ricky…"she said close to his face. The moans multiplied.

"Ricky, can you hear me? It's Birdy, Rick. Birdy."

"Birdy?"

"We're locked in, Ricky. Where are the keys?"

"… keys?"

"You're not wearing your belt, Ricky," she spoke slowly, as if to an idiot, “where-are-your-keys?"

The jigsaw Ricky was doing in his aching head was suddenly solved, and he sat up. "Boy!" he said.

"What boy?"

"In the John. Dead in the John."

"Dead? Oh Christ. Dead? Are you sure?"

Ricky was in some sort of trance, it seemed. He didn't look at her, he just stared into middle-distance, seeing something she couldn't.

"Where are the keys?" she asked again. "Ricky. It's important. Concentrate."

"Keys?"

She wanted to slap him now, but his face was already bloody and it seemed sadistic.

"On the floor," he said after a time.

"In the John? On the floor in the John?"

Ricky nodded. The movement of his head seemed to dislodge some terrible thoughts: suddenly he looked as though he was going to cry.

"It's all going to be all right," said Birdy.

Ricky's hands had found his face, and he was feeling his features, a ritual of reassurance.

"Am I here?" he inquired quietly. Birdy didn't hear him, she was

steeling herself for the John. She had to go in there, no doubt about that, body or no body. Get in, fetch the keys, get out again. Do it now.

She stepped through the door. It occurred to her as she did so that she'd never been in a men's toilet before, and she sincerely hoped this would be the first and only occasion.

The toilet was almost in darkness. The light was flickering in the same fitful way as the lights in the cinema, but at a lower level. She stood at the door, letting her eyes accommodate the gloom, and scanned the place.

The toilet was empty. There was no boy on the floor, dead or alive.

The keys were there though. Ricky's belt was lying in the gutter of the urinal. She fished it out, the oppressive smell of the disinfectant block making her sinuses ache. Disengaging the keys from their ring she stepped out of the toilet into the comparative freshness of the cinema. And it was all over, simple as that.

Ricky had hoisted himself on to one of the seats, and was slumped in it, looking sicker and sorrier for himself than ever. He looked up as he heard Birdy emerge. "I've got the keys," she said.

He grunted: God, he looked ill, she thought. Some of her sympathy had evaporated however. He was obviously having hallucinations, and they probably had chemical 'origins. It was his own damn fault.

"There's no boy in there, Ricky."

"What?"

There's no body in the John; nobody at all. What are you on anyhow?"

Ricky looked down at his shaking hands.

"I'm not on anything. Honestly."

"Damn stupid," she said. She half-suspected that he'd set her up for this somehow, except that practical jokes weren't his style. Ricky was quite a puritan in his way: that had been one of his attractions.

"Do you need a doctor?"

He shook his head sulkily.

"Are you sure?"

"I said no," he snapped.

"OK, I offered." She was already marching up the rake of the aisle, muttering something under her breath. At the foyer door she stopped and called across to him.

"I think we've got an intruder. There was somebody on the extension line. Do you want to stand watch by the front door while I fetch a cop?"

"In a minute."

Ricky sat in the flickering light and examined his sanity. If Birdy said the boy wasn't in there, then presumably she was telling the truth. The best way to verify that was to see for himself. Then he'd be certain he'd suffered a minor reality crisis brought on by some bad dope, and he'd go home, lay his head down to sleep and wake tomorrow afternoon healed. Except that he didn't want to put his head in that evil-smelling room. Suppose she was wrong, and she was the one having the crisis? Weren't there such things as hallucinations of normality?

Shakily, he hauled himself up, crossed the aisle and pushed open the door. It was murky inside, but he could see enough to know that there were no sand-storms, or dead boys, no gun-toting cowboys, nor even a solitary rumble-weed. It's quite a thing, he thought, this mind of mine. To have created an alternative world so eerily well. It was a wonderful trick. Pity it couldn't be turned to better use than scaring him shitless. You win some, you lose some.

And then he saw the blood. On the tiles. A smear of blood that hadn't come from his nicked ear, there was too much of it. Ha! He didn't imagine it at all. There was blood, heel marks, every sign that what he thought he'd seen, he'd seen. But Jesus in Heaven, which was worse? To see, or not to see? Wouldn't it have been better to be wrong, and just a little spaced-out tonight, than right, and in the hands of a power that could literally change the world?

Ricky stared at the trail of blood, and followed it across the floor of the toilet to the cubicle on the left of his vision. Its door was closed: it had been open before. The murderer, whoever he was, had put the boy in there, Ricky knew it without looking.

"OK," he said, “now I've got you."

He pushed on the door. It swung open and there was the boy, propped up on the toilet seat, legs spread, arms hanging.

His eyes had been scooped out of his head. Not neatly: no surgeon's job. They'd been wrenched out, leaving a trail of mechanics down his cheek.

Ricky put his hand over his mouth and told himself he wasn't going to throw up. His stomach churned, but obeyed, and he ran to the toilet door as though any moment the body was going to get up and demand its ticket-money back.

"Birdy… Birdy the fat bitch had been wrong, all wrong. There was death here, and worse.

Ricky flung himself out of the John into the body of the cinema.

The wall-lights were fairly dancing behind their Deco shades, guttering like candles on the verge of extinction. Darkness would be too much; he'd lose his mind.

There was, it occurred to him, something familiar about the way the lights flickered, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He stood in the aisle for a moment, hopelessly lost.

Then the voice came; and though he guessed it was death this time, he looked up.

"Hello Ricky," she was saying as she came along Rowe towards him. Not Birdy. No, Birdy never wore a white gossamer dress, never had bruise-full lips, or hair so fine, or eyes so sweetly promising. It was Monroe who was walking towards him, the blasted rose of America. "Aren't you going to say hello?" she gently chided.

"… er…"

"Ricky. Ricky. Ricky. After all this time."

All this time? What did she mean: all this time?

"Who are you?"

She smiled radiantly at him.

"As if you didn't know."

"You're not Marilyn. Marilyn's dead."

"Nobody dies in the movies, Ricky. You know that as well as I do. You can always thread the celluloid up again -"

–that was what the flickering reminded him of, the flicker of celluloid through the gate of a projector, one image hot on the next, the illusion of life created from a perfect sequence of little deaths.

" – and we're there again, all-talking, all-singing." She laughed: ice-in-a-glass laughter, "We never fluff our lines, never age, never lose our timing -"

"You're not real," said Ricky.

She looked faintly bored by the observation, as if he was being pedantic.

By now she'd come to the end of the row and was standing no more than three feet away from him. At this distance the illusion was as ravishing and as complete as ever. He suddenly wanted to take her, there, in the aisle. What the hell if she was just a fiction: fictions are fuckable if you don't want marriage.

"I want you," he said, surprised by his own bluntness.

"I want you," she replied, which surprised him even more. "In fact I need you. I'm very weak."

"Weak?"

"It's not easy, being the centre of attraction, you know. You find you need it, more and more. Need people to look at you. All the night, all the day."

"I'm looking."

"Am I beautiful?"

"You're a goddess: whoever you are."

"I'm yours: that's who I am."

It was a perfect answer. She was defining herself through him. I am a function of you; made for you out of you. The perfect fantasy. "Keep looking at me; looking forever, Ricky. I need your loving looks. I can't live without them."

The more he stared at her the stronger her image seemed to

become. The flickering had almost stopped; a calm had settled over the place.

"Do you want to touch me?"

He thought she'd never ask.

"Yes," he said.

"Good." She smiled coaxingly at him, and he reached to make contact. She elegantly avoided his fingertips at the last possible moment, and ran, laughing, down the aisle towards the screen. He followed, eager. She wanted a game: that was fine by him.

She'd run into a cul-de-sac. There was no way out from this end of the cinema, and judging by the come-ons she was giving him, she knew it. She turned and flattened herself against the wall, feet spread a little.

He was within a couple of yards of her when a breeze out of nowhere billowed her skirt up around her waist. She laughed, half-closing her eyes, as the surf of silk rose and exposed her. She was naked underneath.

Ricky reached for her again and this time she didn't avoid his touch. The dress billowed up a little higher and he stared, fixated, at the part of Marilyn he had never seen, the fur divide that had been the dream of millions.

There was blood there. Not much, a few fingermarks on her inner thighs. The faultless gloss of her flesh was spoiled slightly. Still he stared; and the lips parted a little as she moved her hips, and he realised the glint of wetness in her interior was not the juice of her body, but something else altogether. As her muscles moved the bloody eyes she'd buried in her body shifted, and came to rest on him.

She knew by the look on his face that she hadn't hidden them deep enough, but where was a girl with barely a veil of cloth covering her nakedness to hide the fruits of her labour?

"You killed him," said Ricky, still looking at the lips, and the eyes that peeked out between. The image was so engrossing, so pristine, it all but cancelled out the horror in his belly. Perversely, his disgust fed his lust instead of killing it. So what if she was a murderer: she was legend.

"Love me," she said. "Love me forever."

He came to her, knowing now full well that it was death to do so. But death was a relative matter, wasn't it? Marilyn was dead in the flesh, but alive here, either in his brain, or in the buzzing matrix of the air or both; and he could be with her.

He embraced her, and she him. They kissed. It was easy. Her lips were softer than he'd imagined, and he felt something close to pain at his crotch he wanted to be in her so much.

The willow-thin arms slipped around his waist, and he was in the lap of luxury.

"You make me strong," she said. "Looking at me that way. I need to be looked at, or I die. It's the natural state of illusions."

Her embrace was tightening; the arms at his back no longer seemed quite so willow-like. He struggled a little against the discomfort.

"No use," she cooed in his ear. "You're mine."

He wrenched his head around to look at her grip and to his amazement the arms weren't arms any longer, just a loop of something round his back, without hands or fingers or wrists.

"Jesus Christ!" he said.

"Look at me, boy," she said. The words had lost their delicacy. It wasn't Marilyn that had him in its arms any more: nothing like her. The embrace tightened again, and the breath was forced from Ricky's body, breath the tightness of the hold prevented him from recapturing. His spine creaked under the pressure, and pain shot through his body like flares, exploding in his eyes, all colours.

"You should have got out of town," said Marilyn, as Wayne's face blossomed under the sweep of her perfect cheek-bones. His look was contemptuous, but Ricky had only a moment to register it before that image cracked too, and something else came into focus behind this facade of famous faces. For the last time in his life, Ricky asked the question: "Who are you?"

His captor didn't answer. It was feeding on his fascination; even as he stared twin organs erupted out of its body like the horns of a slug, antennae perhaps, forming themselves into probes and crossing the space between its head and Ricky's.

"I need you," it said, its voice now neither Wayne nor Monroe, but a crude, uncultivated voice, a thug's voice. Tm so fucking weak; it uses me up, being in the world."

It was mainlining on him, feeding itself, whatever it was, on his stares, once adoring – now horrified. He could feel it draining out his life through his eyes, luxuriating in the soul-looks he was giving it as he perished.

He knew he must be nearly dead, because he hadn't taken a breath in a long while. It seemed like minutes, but he couldn't be sure.

Just as he was listening for the sound of his heart, the horns divided around his head and pressed themselves into his ears. Even in this reverie, the sensation was disgusting, and he wanted to cry out for it to stop. But the fingers were working their way into his head, bursting his ear-drums, and passing on like inquisitive tapeworms through brain and skull. He was alive, even now, still staring at his tormentor, and he knew that the fingers were finding his eyeballs, and pressing on them now from behind.

His eyes bulged suddenly and broke from their housing, splashing from his sockets. Momentarily he saw the world from a different angle as his sense of sight cascaded down his cheek. There was his lip, his chin. It was an appalling experience, and mercifully short. Then the feature Ricky'd lived for thirty-seven years snapped in mid-reel, and he slumped in the arms of fiction.

Ricky's seduction and death had occupied less than three minutes. In that time Birdy had tried every key on Ricky's ring, and could get none of the damn things to open the door. Had she not persisted she might have gone back into the cinema and asked for some help. But things mechanical, even locks and keys, were a challenge to her womanhood. She despised the way men felt some instinctive superiority over her sex when it came to engines, systems and logical processes, and she was damned if she was going to go whining back to Ricky to tell him she couldn't open the damn door.

By the time she'd given up the job, so had Ricky. He was dead and gone. She swore, colourfully, at the keys, and admitted defeat. Ricky clearly had a knack with these wretched things that she'd never quite grasp. Good luck to him. All she wanted now was out of this place. It was getting claustrophobic. She didn't like being locked in, not knowing who was lurking around upstairs.

And now to cap it all, the lights in the foyer were on the blink, dying away flicker by flicker. What the hell was going on in this place anyhow?

Without warning the lights went out altogether, and beyond the doors into the cinema she was sure she heard movement. A light spilled through from the other side, stronger than torchlight, twitching, colourful.

"Ricky?" she chanced into the dark. It seemed to swallow her words. Either that or she didn't believe it was Ricky at all, and something was telling her to make her appeal, if she had to, in a whisper.

"Ricky…?"

The lips of the swing-doors smacked together gently as something pressed on them from the other side.

"…is that you?"

The air was electric: static was crackling off her shoes as she walked towards the door, the hairs on her arms were rigid. The light on the other side was growing brighter with every step.

She stopped advancing, thinking better of her enquiries. It wasn't Ricky, she knew that. Maybe it was the man or woman on the phone, some pebble-eyed lunatic who got off on stalking fat women.

She took two steps back towards the Ticket Office, her feet sparking, and reached under the counter for the Motherfucker, an iron bar which she'd kept there since she'd been trapped in the Office by three would-be thieves with shaved heads and electric drills. She'd screamed blue murder and they'd fled, but next time she swore she'd beat one (or all of them) senseless rather than be terrorised. And the Motherfucker, all three feet of it, was her chosen weapon.

Armed now, she faced the doors.

They blew open suddenly, and a roar of white noise filled her head, and a voice through the roar said: "Here's looking at you, kid."

An eye, a single vast eye, was filling the doorway. The noise deafened her; the eye blinked, huge and wet and lazy, scanning the doll in front of it with the insolence of the One True God, the maker of celluloid Earth and celluloid Heaven.

Birdy was terrified, no other word for it. This wasn't a look-behind-you thrill, there was no delicious anticipation, no pleasurable fright. It was real fear, bowel-fear, unadorned and ugly as shit.

She could hear herself whimpering under the relentless gaze of the eye, her legs were weakening. Soon she'd fall on the carpet in front of the door, and that would be the end of her, surely.

Then she remembered Motherfucker. Dear Motherfucker, bless his phallic heart. She raised the bar in a two-handed grip and ran at the eye, swinging.

Before she made contact the eye closed, the light went out, and she was in darkness again, her retina burning from the sight.

In the darkness, somebody said: "Ricky's dead."

Just that. It was worse than the eye, worse than all the dead voices of Hollywood, because she knew somehow it was true. The cinema had become a slaughterhouse. Lindi Lee's Dean had died as Ricky had said he had, and now Ricky was dead as well. The doors were all locked, the game was down to two. Her and it.

She made a dash for the stairs, not sure of her plan of action, but certain that remaining in the foyer was suicidal. As her foot touched the bottom stair the swing-doors sighed open again behind her and something came after her, fast and flickering. It was a step or two behind her as she breathlessly mounted the stairs, cursing her bulk. Spasms of brilliant light shot by her from its body like the first igniting flashes of a Roman Candle. It was preparing another trick, she was certain of it.

She reached the top of the stairs with her admirer still on her heels. Ahead, the corridor, lit by a single greasy bulb, promised very little comfort. It ran the full length of the cinema, and there were a few storerooms off it, piled with crap: posters, 3-D spectacles, mildewed stills. In one of the storerooms there was a fire-door, she was sure. But which? She'd only been up here once, and that two years ago.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," she said. She ran to the first storeroom. The door was locked. She beat on it, protesting. It stayed locked. The next the same. The third the same. Even if she could remember which storeroom contained the escape route the doors were too heavy to break down. Given ten minutes and Motherfucker's help she might do it. But the Eye was at her back: she didn't have ten seconds, never mind ten minutes.

There was nothing for it but confrontation. She spun on her heel, a prayer on her lips, to face the staircase and her pursuer. The landing was empty.

She stared at the forlorn arrangement of dead bulbs and peeling paint as if to discover the invisible, but the thing wasn't in front of her at all, it was behind. The brightness flared again at her back, and this time the Roman Candle caught, fire became light, light became image, and glories she'd almost forgotten were spilling down the corridor towards her. Unleashed scenes from a thousand movies: each with its unique association. She began, for the first time, to understand the origins of this remarkable species. It was a ghost in the machine of the cinema: a son of celluloid.

"Give your soul to me," a thousand stars." said.

"I don't believe in souls," she replied truthfully.

Then give me what you give to the screen, what everybody gives. Give me some love."

That's why all those scenes were playing, and replaying, and playing again, in front of her. They were all moments when an audience was magically united with the screen, bleeding through its eyes, looking and looking and looking. She'd done it herself, often. Seen a film and felt it move her so deeply it was almost a physical pain when the end credits rolled and the illusion was broken, because she felt she'd left something of herself behind, a part of her inner being lost up there amongst her heroes and her heroines. Maybe she had. Maybe the air carried the cargo of her desires and deposited them somewhere, intermingled with the cargo of other hearts, all gathering together in some niche, until this. This child of their collective passions: this technicolour seducer; trite, crass and utterly bewitching.

Very well, she thought, it's one thing to understand your executioner: another thing altogether to talk it out of its professional obligations.

Even as she sorted the enigma out she was lapping up the pictures in the thing: she couldn't help herself. Teasing glimpses of lives she'd lived, faces she'd loved. Mickey Mouse, dancing with a broom, Gish in "Broken Blossoms', Garland (with Toto at her side) watching the twister louring over Kansas, Astaire in "Top Hat', Welles in "Kane', Brando and Crawford, Tracy and Hepburn – people so engraved on our hearts they need no Christian names. And so much better to be

teased by these moments, to be shown only the pre-kiss melt, not the kiss itself; the slap, not the reconciliation; the shadow, not the monster; the wound, not death.

It had her in thrall, no doubt of it. She was held by her eyes as surely as if it had them out on their stalks, and chained. "Am I beautiful?" it said. Yes it was beautiful.

"Why don't you give yourself to me?"

She wasn't thinking any more, her powers of analysis had drained from her, until something appeared in the muddle of images that slapped her back into herself. "Dumbo'. The fat elephant. Her fat elephant: no more than that, the fat elephant she'd thought was her.

The spell broke. She looked away from the creature. For a moment, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something sickly and fly-blown beneath the glamour. They'd called her Dumbo as a child, all the kids on her block. She'd lived with that ridiculous grey horror for twenty years, never able to shake it off. Its fat body reminded her of her fat, its lost look of her isolation. She thought of it cradled in the trunk of its mother, condemned as a Mad Elephant, and she wanted to beat the sentimental thing senseless.

"It's a fucking lie!" she spat at it.

"I don't know what you mean," it protested.

"What's under all the pizzazz then? Something very nasty I think."

The light began to flicker, the parade of trailers faltering. She could see another shape, small and dark, lurking behind the curtains of light. Doubt was in it. Doubt and fear of dying. She was sure she could smell the fear off it, at ten paces.

"What are you, under there?"

She took a step towards it.

"What are you hiding? Eh?"

It found a voice. A frightened, human voice. "You've no business with me."

"You tried to kill me."

"I want to live."

"So do I."

It was getting dark this end of the corridor, and there was an old, bad smell here, of rot. She knew rot, and this was something animal. Only last spring, when the snow had melted, she'd found something very dead in the yard behind her apartment. Small dog, large cat, it was difficult to be sure. Something domestic that had died of cold in the sudden snows the December before. Now it was besieged with maggots: yellowish, greyish, pinkish: a pastel fly-machine with a thousand moving parts.

It had around it the same stink that lingered here. Maybe that was somehow the flesh behind the fantasy. Taking courage, her eyes still stinging with "Dumbo', she advanced on the wavering mirage, Motherfucker raised in case the thing tried any funny business.

The boards beneath her feet were creaking, but she was too interested in her quarry to listen to their warnings. It was time she got a hold of this killer, shook it and made it spit its secret.

They'd almost gone the length of the corridor now, her advancing, it retreating. There was nowhere left for the thing to go.

Suddenly the floorboards folded up into dusty fragments under her weight and she was falling through the floor in a cloud of dust. She dropped Motherfucker as she threw out her hands to catch hold of something, but it was all worm-ridden, and crumbled in her grasp.

She fell awkwardly and landed hard on something soft. Here the smell of rot was incalculably stronger, it coaxed the stomach into the throat. She reached out her hand to right herself in the darkness, and on every side there was slime and cold. She felt as though she'd been dumped in a case of partially-gutted fish. Above her, the anxious light shone through the boards as it fell on her bed. She looked, though God knows she didn't want to, and she was lying in the remains of a man, his body spread by his devourers over quite an area. She wanted to howl. Her instinct was to tear off her skirt and blouse, both of which were gluey with matter; but she couldn't go naked, not in front of the son of celluloid.

It still looked down at her.

"Now you know," it said, lost.

"This is you -"

"This is the body I once occupied, yes. His name was Barberio. A criminal; nothing spectacular. He never aspired to greatness."

"And you?"

"His cancer. I'm the piece of him which did aspire, that did long to be more than a humble cell. I am a dreaming disease. No wonder I love the movies."

The son of celluloid was weeping over the edge of the broken floor, its true body exposed now it had no reason to fabricate a glory.

It was a filthy thing, a tumour grown fat on wasted passion. A parasite with the shape of a slug, and the texture of raw liver. For a moment a toothless mouth, badly moulded, formed at its head-end and said: "I'm going to have to find a new way to eat your soul."

It flopped down into the crawlspace beside Birdy. Without its shimmering coat of many technicolours it was the size of a small child. She backed away as it stretched a sensor to touch her, but avoidance was a limited option. The crawlspace was narrow, and further along it was blocked with what looked to be broken chairs and discarded prayer-books. There was no way out but the way she'd come, and that was fifteen feet above her head.

Tentatively, the cancer touched her foot, and she was sick. She couldn't help it, even though she was ashamed to be giving in to such primitive responses. It revolted her as nothing ever had before; it brought to mind something aborted, a bucket-case.

"Go to hell," she said to it, kicking at its head, but it kept coming, its diarrheal mass trapping her legs. She could feel the churning motion of its innards as it rose up to her.

Its bulk on her belly and groin was almost sexual, and revolted as she was by her own train of thought she wondered dimly if such a thing aspired to sex. Something about the insistence of its forming and reforming feelers against her skin, probing tenderly beneath her blouse, stretching to touch her lips, only made sense as desire. Let it come then, she thought, let it come if it has to.

She let it crawl up her until it was entirely perched on her body, fighting every moment the urge to throw it off – and then she sprang her trap. She rolled over.

She'd weighed 225 pounds at the last count, and she was probably

more now. The thing was beneath her before it could work out how or why this had happened, and its pores were oozing the sick sap of rumours.

It fought, but it couldn't get out from under, however much it squirmed. Birdy dug her nails into it and began to tear at its sides, taking cobs out of it, spongy cobs that set more fluids gushing. Its howls of anger turned into howls of pain. After a short while, the dreaming disease stopped fighting. Birdy lay still for a moment. Underneath her, nothing moved. At last, she got up. It was impossible to know if the tumour was dead. It hadn't, by any standards that she understood, lived. Besides, she wasn't touching it again. She'd wrestle the Devil himself rather than embrace Barberio's cancer a second time. She looked up at the corridor above her and despaired. Was she now to die in here, like Barberio before her? Then, as she glanced down at her adversary, she noticed the grille. It hadn't been visible while it was still night outside. Now dawn was breaking, and columns of dishwater light were creeping through the lattice.

She bent to the grille, pushed it hard, and suddenly the day was in the crawlspace with her, all around her. It was a squeeze to get through the small door, and she kept thinking every moment that she felt the thing crawling across her legs, but she hauled herself into the world with only bruised breasts to complain of.

The abandoned lot hadn't changed substantially since Barberio's visit there. It was merely more nettle-thronged. She stood for a while breathing in draughts of fresh air, then made for the fence and the street beyond it.

The fat woman with the haggard look and the stinking clothes was given a wide berth by newsboys and dogs alike as she made her way home.

THREE: CENSORED SCENES

It wasn't the end.

The police went to the Movie Palace just after nine-thirty. Birdy went with them. The search revealed the mutilated bodies of Dean and Ricky, as well as the remains of "Sonny ' Barberio. Upstairs, in the corner of the corridor, they found a cerise shoe.

Birdy said nothing, but she knew. Lindi Lee had never left.

She was put on trial for a double murder nobody really thought

she'd committed, and acquitted for lack of evidence. It was the order of the court that she be put under psychiatric observation for a period of not less than two years. The woman might not have committed murder, but it was clear she was a raving lunatic. Tales of walking cancers do nobody's reputation much good.

In the early summer of the following year Birdy gave up eating for a week. Most of the weight-loss in that time was water, but it was sufficient to encourage her friends that she was at last going-to tackle the Big Problem.

That weekend, she went missing for twenty-four hours.

Birdy found Lindi Lee in a deserted house in Seattle. She hadn't been so difficult to trace: it was hard for poor Lindi to keep control of herself these days, never mind avoid would-be pursuers. As it happened her parents had given up on her several months previous. Only Birdy had continued to look, paying for an investigator to trace the girl, and finally her patience was rewarded with the sight of the frail beauty, frailer than ever but still beautiful sitting in this bare room. Flies roamed the air. A turd, perhaps human, sat in the middle of the floor.

Birdy had a gun out before she opened the door. Lindi Lee looked up from her thoughts, or maybe its thoughts, and smiled at her. The greeting lasted a moment only before the parasite in Lindi Lee recognised Birdy's face, saw the gun in her hand and knew exactly what she'd come to do.

"Well," it said, getting up to meet its visitor.

Lindi Lee's eyes burst, her mouth burst, her cunt and ass, her ears and nose all burst, and the tumour poured out of her in shocking pink rivers. It came worming out of her milkless breasts, out of a cut in her thumb, from an abrasion on her thigh. Wherever Lindi Lee was open, it came.

Birdy raised the gun and fired three times. The cancer stretched once towards her, fell back, staggered and collapsed. Once it was still, Birdy calmly took the acid-bottle out of her pocket, unscrewed the top and emptied the scalding contents on human limb and tumour alike. It made no shout as it dissolved, and she left it there, in a patch of sun, a pungent smoke rising from the confusion.

She stepped out into the street, her duty done, and went her way, confidently planning to live long after the credits for this particular

comedy had rolled.

XIII: RAWHEAD REX

Of all the conquering armies that had tramped the streets of Zeal down the centuries, it was finally the mild tread of the Sunday tripper that brought the village to its knees. It had suffered Roman legions, and the Norman conquest, it had survived the agonies of Civil War, all without losing its identity to the occupying forces. But after centuries of boot and blade it was to be the tourists – the new barbarians – that bested Zeal, their weapons courtesy and hard cash.

It was ideally suited for the invasion. Forty miles south-east of London, amongst the orchards and hop-fields of the Kentish Weald, it was far enough from the city to make the trip an adventure, yet close enough to beat a quick retreat if the weather turned foul. Every weekend between May and October Zeal was a watering-hole for parched Londoners. They would swarm through the village on each Saturday that promised sun, bringing their dogs, their plastic balls, their litters of children, and their children's litter, disgorging them in bawling hordes on to the village green, then returning to "The Tall Man' to compare traffic stories over glasses of warm beer.

For their part the Zealots weren't unduly distressed by the Sunday trippers; at least they didn't spill blood. But their very lack of aggression made the invasion all the more insidious.

Gradually these city-weary people began to work a gentle but permanent change on the village. Many of them set their hearts on a home in the country; they were charmed by stone cottages set amongst churning oaks, they were enchanted by doves in the churchyard yews. Even the air, they'd say as they inhaled deeply, even the air smells fresher here. It smells of England.

At first a few, then many, began to make bids for the empty barns and deserted houses that Uttered Zeal and its outskirts. They could be seen every fine weekend, standing in the nettles and rubble, planning how to have a kitchen extension built, and where to install the Jacuzzi. And although many of them, once back in the comfort of Kilburn or St John's Wood, chose to stay there, every year one or two of them would strike a reasonable bargain with one of the villagers, and buy themselves an acre of the good life.

So, as the years passed and the natives of Zeal were picked off by old age, the civil savages took over in their stead. The occupation was subtle, but the change was plain to the knowing eye. It was there in

the newspapers the Post Office began to stock – what native of Zeal had ever purchased a copy of "Harpers and Queen' magazine, or leafed through "The Times Literary Supplement'? It was there, that change, in the bright new cars that clogged the one narrow street, laughingly called the High Road, that was Zeal's backbone. It was there too in the buzz of gossip at "The Tall Man', a sure sign that the affairs of the foreigners had become fit subject for debate and mockery.

Indeed, as time went by the invaders found a yet more permanent place in the heart of Zeal, as the perennial demons of their hectic lives, Cancer and Heart Disease, took their toll, following their victims even into this newfound-land. Like the Romans before them, like the Normans, like all invaders, the commuters made, their profoundest mark upon this usurped turf not by building on it, but by being buried under it.

It was clammy the middle of that September; Zeal's last September.

Thomas Garrow, the only son of the late Thomas Garrow, was sweating up a healthy thirst as he dug in the corner of the Three Acre Field. There'd been a violent rainstorm the previous day, Thursday, and the earth was sodden. Clearing the ground for sowing next year hadn't been the easy job Thomas thought it'd be, but he'd sworn blind he'd have the field finished by the end of the week. It was heavy labour, clearing stones, and sorting out the detritus of out-of-date machinery his father, lazy bastard, had left to rust where it lay. Must have been some good years, Thomas thought, some pretty fine damn years, that his father could afford to let good machinery waste away. Come to think of it, that he could have afforded to leave the best part of three acres unploughed; good healthy soil too. This was the Garden of England after all: land was money. Leaving three acres fallow was a luxury nobody could afford in these straitened times. But Jesus, it was hard work: the kind of work his father had put him to in his youth, and he'd hated with a vengeance ever since. Still, it had to be done.

And the day had begun well. The tractor was healthier after its overhaul, and the morning sky was rife with gulls, across from the coast for a meal of freshly turned worms. They'd kept him raucous company as he worked, their insolence and their short tempers always entertaining. But then, when he came back to the field after a liquid lunch in "The Tall Man, things began to go wrong. The engine started to cut out for one, the same problem that he'd just spent J200 having seen to; and then, when he'd only been back at work a few minutes, he'd found the stone.

It was an unspectacular lump of stuff: poking out of the soil perhaps a foot, its visible diameter a few inches short of a yard, its surface smooth and bare. No lichen even; just a few grooves in its face that might have once been words. A love-letter perhaps, a "Kilroy was here' more likely, a date and a name likeliest of all. Whatever it had once been, monument or milestone, it was in the way now. He'd have to dig it up, or next year he'd lose a good three yards of ploughable land. There was no way a plough could skirt around a boulder that size.

Thomas was surprised that the damn thing had been left in the field for so long without anyone bothering to remove it. But then it was a long spell since the Three Acre Field had been planted: certainly not in his thirty-six years. And maybe, now he came to think of it, not in his father's lifetime either. For some reason (if he'd ever known the reason he'd forgotten it) this stretch of Garrow land had been left fallow for a good many seasons, maybe even for generations. In fact there was a suspicion tickling the back of his skull that someone, probably his father, had said no crop would ever grow in that particular spot. But that was plain nonsense. If anything plant life, albeit nettles and convolvulus, grew thicker and ranker in this forsaken three acres than in any other plot in the district. So there was no reason on earth why hops shouldn't flourish here. Maybe even an orchard: though that took more patience and love than Thomas suspected he possessed. Whatever he chose to plant, it would surely spring up from such rich ground with a rare enthusiasm, and he'd have reclaimed three acres of good land to bolster his shaky finances.

If he could just dig out that bloody stone.

He'd half thought of hiring in one of the earth movers from the building site at the North End of the village, just to haul itself across here and get its mechanical jaws working on the problem. Have the stone out and away in two seconds flat. But his pride resisted the idea of running for help at the first sign of a blister. The job was too small anyhow. He'd dig it out himself, the way his father would have done. That's what he'd decided. Now, two and a half hours later, he was regretting his haste.

The ripening warmth of the afternoon had soured in that time, and the air, without much of a breeze to stir it around, had become stifling. Over from the Downs came a stuttering roll of thunder, and Thomas could feel the static crawling at the nape of his neck, making the short hairs there stand up. The sky above the field was empty now: the gulls, too fickle to hang around once the fun was over, had taken some salt-smelling thermal.

Even the earth, that had given up a sweet-sharp flavour as the blades turned it that morning, now smelt joyless; and as he dug the black soil out from around the stone his mind returned helplessly to the putrefaction that made it so very rich. His thoughts circled vacuously on the countless little deaths on every spadeful of soil he dug. This wasn't the way he was used to thinking, and the morbidity of it distressed him. He stopped for a moment, leaning on his spade, and regretting the fourth pint of Guinness he'd downed at lunch. That was normally a harmless enough ration, but today it swilled around in his belly, he could hear it, as dark as the soil on his spade, working up a scum of stomach-acid and half-digested food.

Think of something else, he told himself, or you'll get to puking. To take his mind off his belly, he looked at the field. It was nothing out of the ordinary; just a rough square of land bounded by an untrimmed hawthorn hedge. One or two dead animals lying in the shadow of the hawthorn: a starling; something else, too far gone to be recognisable. There was a sense of absence, but that wasn't so unusual. It would soon be autumn, and the summer had been too long, too hot for comfort.

Looking up higher than the hedge he watched the mongol-headed cloud discharge a flicker of lightning to the hills. What had been the brightness of the afternoon was now pressed into a thin line of blue at the horizon. Rain soon, he thought, and the thought was welcome. Cool rain; perhaps a downpour like the previous day. Maybe this time it would clear the air good and proper.

Thomas stared back down at the unyielding stone, and struck it with his spade. A tiny arc of white flame flew off. He cursed, loudly and inventively: the stone, himself, the field. The stone just sat there in the moat he'd dug around it, defying him. He'd almost run out of options: the earth around the thing had been dug out two feet down; he'd hammered stakes under it, chained it and then got the tractor going to haul it out. No joy. Obviously he'd have to dig the moat deeper, drive the stakes further down. He wasn't going to let the damn thing beat him.

Grunting his determination he set to digging again. A fleck of rain hit the back of his hand, but he scarcely noticed it. He knew by experience that labour like this took singularity of purpose: head down, ignore all distractions. He made his mind blank. There was just the earth, the spade, the stone and his body.

Push down, scoop up. Push down, scoop up, a hypnotic rhythm of

effort. The trance was so total he wasn't sure how long he worked before the stone began to shift.

The movement woke him. He stood upright, his vertebrae clicking, not quite certain that the shift was anything more than a twitch in his eye. Putting his heel against the stone, he pushed. Yes, it rocked in its grave. He was too drained to smile, but he felt victory close. He had the bugger.

The rain was starting to come on heavier now, and it felt fine on his face. He drove a couple more stakes in around the stone to unseat it a little further: he was going to get the better of the thing. You'll see, he said, you'll see. The third stake went deeper than the first two, and it seemed to puncture a bubble of gas beneath the stone, a yellowish cloud smelling so foul he stepped away from the hole to snatch a breath of purer air. There was none to be had. All he could do was hawk up a wad of phlegm to clear his throat and lungs. Whatever was under the stone, and there was something animal in the stench, it was very rotten.

He forced himself back down to the work, taking gasps of the air into his mouth, not through his nostrils. His head felt tight, as though his brain was swelling and straining against the dome of his skull, pushing to be let out.

"Fuck you," he said and beat another stake under the stone. His back felt as though it was about to break. On his right hand a blister had bust. A cleg sat on his arm and feasted itself, unswatted.

"Do it. Do it. Do it." He beat the last stake in without knowing he was doing it.

And then, the stone began to roll. He wasn't even touching it. The stone was being pushed out of its seating from beneath. He reached for his spade, which was still wedged beneath the stone. He suddenly felt possessive of it; it was his, a part of him, and he didn't want it near the hole. Not now; not with the stone rocking like it had a geyser under it about to blow. Not with the air yellow, and his brain swelling up like a marrow in August. He pulled hard on his spade: it wouldn't come. He cursed it, and took two hands to the job, keeping at arm's length from the hole as he hauled, the increasing motion of the stone slinging up showers of soil, lice, and pebbles.

He heaved at the spade again, but it wouldn't give. He didn't stop to analyse the situation. The work had sickened him, all he wanted was

to get his spade, his spade, out of the hole and get the hell out of there.

The stone bucked, but still he wouldn't let go of the spade, it had become fixed in his head that he had to have it before he could leave. Only when it was back in his hands, safe and sound, would he obey his bowels, and run.

Beneath his feet the ground began to erupt. The stone rolled away from the tomb as if feather-light, a second cloud of gas, more obnoxious than the first, seemed to blow it on its way. At the same time the spade came out of the hole, and Thomas saw what had hold of it.

Suddenly there was no sense in heaven or earth.

There was a hand, a living hand, clutching the spade, a hand so wide it could grasp the blade with ease.

Thomas knew the moment well. The splitting earth: the hand: the stench. He knew it from some nightmare he'd heard at his father's knee.

Now he wanted to let go of the spade, but he no longer had the will. All he could do was obey some imperative from underground, to haul until his ligaments tore and his sinews bled.

Beneath the thin crust of earth, Rawhead smelt the sky. It was pure ether to his dulled senses, making him sick with pleasure. Kingdoms for the taking, just a few inches away. After so many years, after the endless suffocation, there was light on his eyes again, and the taste of human terror on his tongue.

His head was breaking surface now, his black hair wreathed with worms, his scalp seething with tiny red spiders. They'd irritated him a hundred years, those spiders burrowing into his marrow, and he longed to crush them out. Pull, pull, he willed the human, and Thomas Garrow pulled until his pitiful body had no strength left, and inch by inch Rawhead was hoisted out of his grave in a shroud of prayers.

The stone that had pressed on him for so long had been removed, and he was dragging himself up easily now, sloughing off the grave-earth like a snake its skin. His torso was free. Shoulders twice as broad as a man's; lean, scarred arms stronger than any human. His limbs were pumping with blood like a butterfly's wings, juicing with

resurrection. His long, lethal fingers rhythmically clawed the ground as they gained strength.

Thomas Garrow just stood and watched. There was nothing in him but awe. Fear was for those who still had a chance of life: he had none.

Rawhead was out of his grave completely. He began to stand upright for the first time in centuries. Clods of damp soil fell from his torso as he stretched to his full height, a yard above Garrow's six feet.

Thomas Garrow stood in Rawhead's shadow with his eyes still fixed on the gaping hole the King had risen from. In his right hand he still clutched his spade. Rawhead picked him up by the hair. His scalp tore under the weight of his body, so Rawhead seized Garrow round the neck, his vast hand easily enclosing it.

Blood ran down Garrow's face from his scalp, and the sensation stirred him. Death was imminent, and he knew it. He looked down at his legs, thrashing uselessly below him, then he looked up and stared directly into Rawhead's pitiless face.

It was huge, like the harvest moon, huge and amber. But this moon had eyes that burned in its pallid, pitted face. They were for all the world like wounds, those eyes, as though somebody had gouged them in the flesh of Rawhead's face then set two candles to flicker in the holes.

Garrow was entranced by the vastness of this moon. He looked from eye to eye, and then to the wet slits that were its nose, and finally, in a childish terror, down to the mouth. God, that mouth. It was so wide, so cavernous it seemed to split the head in two as it opened. That was Thomas Garrow's last thought. That the moon was splitting in two, and falling out of the sky on top of him.

Then the King inverted the body, as had always been his way with his dead enemies, and drove Thomas head first into the hole, winding him down into the very grave his forefathers had intended to bury Rawhead in forever.

By the time the thunderstorm proper broke over Zeal, the King was a mile away from the Three Acre Field, sheltering in the Nicholson barn. In the village everyone went about their business, rain or no rain. Ignorance was bliss. There was no Cassandra amongst them, nor had "Your Future in the Stars' in that week's "Gazette' even hinted at the sudden deaths to come to a Gemini, three Leos, a Sagittarian and a

minor star-system of others in the next few days.

The rain had come with the thunder, fat cool spots of it, which rapidly turned into a downpour of monsoonal ferocity. Only when the gutters became torrents did people begin to take shelter.

On the building site the earth-mover that had been roughly landscaping Ronnie Milton's back garden sat idling in the rain, receiving a second wash down in two days. The driver had taken the downpour as a signal to retire into the hut to talk race-horses and women.

In the doorway of the Post Office three of the villagers watched the drains backing up, and tutted that this always happened when it rained, and in half an hour there'd be a pool of water in the dip at the bottom of the High Street so deep you could sail a boat on it.

And down in the dip itself, in the vestry of St Peter's, Declan Ewan, the Verger, watched the rain pelting down the hill in eager rivulets, and gathering into a little sea outside the vestry gate. Soon be deep enough to drown in, he thought, and then, puzzled by why he imagined drowning, he turned away from the window and went back to the business of folding vestments. A strange excitement was in him today: and he couldn't, wouldn't, didn't want to suppress it. It was nothing to do with the thunderstorm, though he'd always loved them since he was a child. No: there was something else stirring him up, and he was damned if he knew what. It was like being a child again. As if it was Christmas, and any minute Santa, the first Lord he'd ever believed in, would be at the door. The very idea made him want to laugh out loud, but the vestry was too sober a place for laughter, and he stopped himself, letting the smile curl inside him, a secret hope.

While everyone else took refuge from the rain, Gwen Nicholson was getting thoroughly drenched. She was still in the yard behind the house, coaxing Amelia's pony towards the barn. The thunder had made the stupid beast jittery, and it didn't want to budge. Now Gwen was soaked and angry.

"Will you come on, you brute?" she yelled at it over the noise of the storm. The rain lashed the yard, and pummeled the top of her head. Her hair was flattened. "Come on! Come on!"

The pony refused to budge. Its eyes showed crescents of white in its fear. And the more the thunder rolled and crackled around the yard the less it wanted to move. Angrily, Gwen slapped it across the

backside, harder than she strictly needed to. It took a couple of steps in response to the blow, dropping steaming turds as it went, and Gwen took the advantage. Once she had it moving she could drag it the rest of the way.

"Warm barn," she promised it; "Come on, it's wet out here, you don't want to stay out here."

The barn-door was slightly ajar. Surely it must look like an inviting prospect, she thought, even to a pea-brained pony. She dragged it to within spitting distance of the barn, and one more slap got it through the door.

As she'd promised the damn thing, the interior of the barn was sweet and dry, though the air smelt metallic with the storm. Gwen tied the pony to the crossbar in its stall and roughly threw a blanket over its glistening hide. She was damned if she was going to swab the creature down, that was Amelia's job. That was the bargain she'd made with her daughter when they'd agreed to buy the pony: that all the grooming and clearing out would be Amelia's responsibility, and to be fair to her, she'd done what she promised, more or less.

The pony was still panicking. It stamped and rolled its eyes like a bad tragedian. There were flecks of foam on its lips. A little apologetically Gwen patted its flank. She'd lost her temper. Time of the month. Now she regretted it. She only hoped Amelia hadn't been at her bedroom window watching.

A gust of wind caught the barn-door and it swung closed. The sound of rain on the yard outside was abruptly muted. It was suddenly dark.

The pony stopped stamping. Gwen stopped stroking its side. Everything stopped: her heart too, it seemed. Behind her a figure that was almost twice her size rose from beyond the bales of hay. Gwen didn't see the giant, but her innards churned. Damn periods, she thought, rubbing her lower belly in a slow circle. She was normally as regular as clockwork, but this month she'd come on a day early. She should go back to the house, get changed, get clean.

Rawhead stood and looked at the nape of Gwen Nicholson's neck, where a single nip would easily kill. But there was no way he could bring himself to touch this woman; not today. She had the blood-cycle on her, he could taste its tang, and it sickened him. It was taboo, that blood, and he had never taken a woman poisoned by its presence.

Feeling the damp between her legs, Gwen hurried out of the barn

without looking behind her, and ran through the downpour back to the house, leaving the fretting pony in the darkness of the barn.

Rawhead heard the woman's feet recede, heard the house door slam.

He waited, to be sure she wouldn't come back, then he padded across to the animal, reached down and took hold of it. The pony kicked and complained, but Rawhead had in his time taken animals far bigger and far better armed than this.

He opened his mouth. The gums were suffused with blood as the teeth emerged from them, like claws unsheathed from a cat's paw. There were two rows on each jaw, two dozen needle-sharp points. They gleamed as they closed around the meat of the pony's neck. Thick, fresh blood poured down Rawhead's throat; he gulped it greedily. The hot taste of the world. It made him feel strong and wise. This was only the first of many meals he would take, he'd gorge on anything that took his fancy and nobody would stop him, not this time. And when he was ready he'd throw those pretenders off his throne, he'd cremate them in their houses, he'd slaughter their children and wear their infants' bowels as necklaces. This place was his. Just because they'd tamed the wilderness for a while didn't mean they owned the earth. It was his, and nobody would take it from him, not even the holiness. He was wise to that too. They'd never subdue him again.

He sat cross-legged on the floor of the barn, the grey-pink intestines of the pony coiled around him, planning his tactics as best he could. He'd never been a great thinker. Too much appetite: it overwhelmed his reason. He lived in the eternal present of his hunger and his strength, feeling only the crude territorial instinct that would sooner or later blossom into carnage.

The rain didn't let up for over an hour.

Ron Milton was becoming impatient: a flaw in his nature that had given him an ulcer and a top-flight job in Design Consultancy. What Milton could get done for you, couldn't be done quicker. He was the best: and he hated sloth in other people as much as in himself. Take this damn house, for instance. They'd promised it would be finished by mid-July, garden landscaped, driveway laid, everything, and here he was, two months after that date, looking at a house that was still far from habitable. Half the windows without glass, the front door missing, the garden an assault-course, the driveway a mire.

This was to be his castle: his retreat from a world that made him dyspeptic and rich. A haven away from the hassles of the city, where Maggie could grow roses, and the children could breathe clean air. Except that it wasn't ready. Damn it, at this rate he wouldn't be in until next spring. Another winter in London: the thought made his heart sink.

Maggie joined him, sheltering him under her red umbrella.

"Where are the kids?" he asked.

She grimaced. "Back at the hotel, driving Mrs. Blatter crazy."

Enid Blatter had borne their cavorting for half a dozen weekends through the summer. She'd had kids of her own, and she handled Debbie and Ian with aplomb. But there was a limit, even to her fund of mirth and merriment.

"We'd better get back to town."

"No. Please let's stay another day or two. We can go back on Sunday evening. I want us all to go to the Harvest Festival Service on Sunday."

Now it was Ron's turn to grimace.

"Oh hell."

"It's all part of village life, Ronnie. If we're going to live here, we have to become part of the community."

He whined like a little boy when he was in this kind of mood. She knew him so well she could hear his next words before he said them.

"I don't want to."

"Well we've no choice.'" We can go back tonight." "Ronnie -”

There's nothing we can do here. The kids are bored, you're miserable…"

Maggie had set her features in concrete; she wasn't going to budge an inch. He knew that face as well as she knew his whining.

He studied the puddles that were forming in what might one day be their front garden, unable to imagine grass there, roses there. It all suddenly seemed impossible.

"You go back to town if you like, Ronnie. Take the kids. I'll stay here. Train it home on Sunday night."

Clever, he thought, to give him a get-out that's more unattractive than staying put. Two days in town looking after the kids alone? No thank you.

"OK. You win. We'll go to the Harvest-bloody-Festival."

"Martyr."

"As long as I don't have to pray."

Amelia Nicholson ran into the kitchen, her round face white, and collapsed in front of her mother. There was greasy vomit on her green plastic mackintosh, and blood on her green plastic Wellingtons.

Gwen yelled for Denny. Their little girl was shivering in her faint, her mouth chewing at a word, or words, that wouldn't come.

"What is it?"

"Denny was thundering down the stairs.

"For Christ's sake – " – Amelia was vomiting again. Her face was practically blue.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She just came in. You'd better ring for an ambulance."

"Denny put his hand on her cheek.

"She's in shock."

"Ambulance, Denny…" Gwen was taking off the green mackintosh, and loosening the child's blouse. Slowly, Denny stood up. Through the rain-laced window he could see into the yard: the barn door flapped open and closed in the wind. Somebody was inside; he glimpsed movement.

"For Christ's sake – ambulance!" Gwen said again.

Denny wasn't listening. There was somebody in his barn, on his property, and he had a strict ritual for trespassers. The barn door opened again, teasing. Yes! Retreating into the dark. Interloper.

He picked up the rifle beside the door, keeping his eyes on the yard as much as he could. Behind him, Gwen had left Amelia on the kitchen floor and was dialing for help. The girl was moaning now: she was going to be OK. Just some filthy trespasser scaring her, that's all. On his land.

He opened the door and stepped into the yard. He was in his shirt-sleeves and the wind was bitingly cold, but the rain had stopped. Underfoot the ground glistened, and drips fell from every eave and portico, a fidgety percussion that accompanied him across the yard.

The barn door swung listlessly ajar again, and this time stayed open. He could see nothing inside. Half wondered if a trick of the light had But no. He'd seen someone moving in here. The barn wasn't empty. Something (not the pony) was watching him even now. They'd see the rifle in his hands, and they'd sweat. Let them. Come into his place like that. Let them think he was going to blow their balls off.

He covered the distance in a half a dozen confident strides and stepped into the barn.

The pony's stomach was beneath his shoe, one of its legs to his right, the upper shank gnawed to the bone. Pools of thickening blood reflected the holes in the roof. The mutilation made him want to heave.

"All right," he challenged the shadows. "Come out." He raised his rifle. "You hear me you bastard? Out I said, or I'll blow you to Kingdom Come."

He meant it too.

At the far end of the barn something stirred amongst the bales.

Now I've got the son of a bitch, thought Denny. The trespasser got up, all nine feet of him, and stared at Denny.

"Jee-sus."

And without warning it was coming at him, coming like a locomotive smooth and efficient. He fired into it, and the bullet struck its upper chest, but the wound hardly slowed it.

Nicholson turned and ran. The stones of the yard were slippery beneath his shoes, and he had no turn of speed to outrun it. It was at his back in two beats, and on him in another.

Gwen dropped the phone when she heard the shot. She raced to the window in time to see her sweet Denny eclipsed by a gargantuan form. It howled as it took him, and threw him up into the air like a sack of feathers. She watched helplessly as his body twisted at the apex of its journey before plummeting back down to earth again. It hit the yard with a thud she felt in her every bone, and the giant was at his body like a shot, treading his loving face to muck.

She screamed; trying to silence herself with her hand. Too late. The sound was out and the giant was looking at her, straight at her, its malice piercing the window. Oh God, it had seen her, and now it was coming for her, loping across the yard, a naked engine, and grinning a promise at her as it came.

Gwen snatched Amelia off the floor and hugged her close, pressing the girl's face against her neck. Maybe she wouldn't see: she mustn't see. The sound of its feet slapping on the wet yard got louder. Its shadow filled the kitchen.

"Jesus help me."

It was pressing at the window, its body so wide that it cancelled out the light, its lewd, revolting face smeared on the watery pane. Then it was smashing through, ignoring the glass that bit into its flesh. It smelled child-meat. It wanted child-meat. It would have child-meat.

Its teeth were spilling into view, widening that smile into an obscene laugh. Ropes of saliva hung from its jaw as it clawed the air, like a cat after a mouse in a cage, pressing further and further in, each swipe closer to the morsel.

Gwen flung open the door into the hall as the thing lost patience with snatching and began to demolish the window-frame and clamber through. She locked the door after her while crockery smashed and wood splintered on the other side, then she began to load all the hall furniture against it. Tables, chairs, coat-stand, knowing even as she did it, that it would be matchwood in two seconds flat. Amelia was kneeling on the hall floor where Gwen had set her down. Her face was a thankful blank.

All right, that was all she could do. Now, upstairs. She picked up her daughter, who was suddenly air-light, and took the stairs two at a time. Halfway up, the noise in the kitchen below stopped utterly.

She suddenly had a reality crisis. On the landing where she stood all was peace and calm. Dust gathered minutely on the window-sills,

flowers wilted; all the infinitesimal domestic procedures went on as though nothing had happened.

"Dreaming it," she said. God, yes: dreaming it.

She sat down on the bed Denny and she had slept in together for eight years, and tried to think straight.

Some vile menstrual nightmare, that's what it was, some rape-fantasy out of all control. She lay Amelia on the pink eiderdown (Denny hated pink, but suffered it for her sake) and stroked the girl's clammy forehead.

"Dreaming it."

Then the room darkened, and she looked up knowing what she'd see.

It was there, the nightmare, all over the upper windows, its spidery arms spanning the width of the glass, clinging like an acrobat to the frame, its repellent teeth sheathing and unsheathing as it gawped at her terror.

In one swooping movement she snatched Amelia up from the bed and dived towards the door. Behind her, glass shattered, and a gust of cold air swept into the bedroom. It was coming.

She ran across the landing to the top of the stairs but it was after her in a heart's beat, ducking through the bedroom door, its mouth a tunnel. It whooped as it reached to steal the mute parcel in her arms, huge in the confined space of the landing.

She couldn't out-run it, she couldn't out-fight it. Its hands fixed on Amelia with insolent ease, and tugged.

The child screamed as it took her, her fingernails raking four furrows across her mother's face as she left her arms.

Gwen stumbled back, dizzied by the unthinkable sight in front of her, and lost balance at the top of the stairs. As she fell backwards she saw Amelia's tear-stained face, doll-stiff, being fed between those rows of teeth. Then her head hit the banister, and her neck broke. She bounced down the last six steps a corpse.

The rain-water had drained away a little by early evening, but the artificial lake at the bottom of the dip still flooded the road to a depth

of several inches. Serenely, it reflected the sky. Pretty, but inconvenient. Reverend Coot quietly reminded Declan Ewan to report the blocked drains to the County Council. It was the third time of asking, and Declan blushed at the request.

"Sorry, I'll…"'All right. No problem, Declan. But we really must get them cleared."

A vacant look. A beat. A thought.

"Autumn fall always clogs them again, of course."

Coot made a roughly cyclical gesture, intending a son of observation about how it really wouldn't make that much difference when or if the Council cleared the drains, then the thought disappeared. There were more pressing issues. For one, the Sunday Sermon. For a second, the reason why he couldn't make much sense of sermon writing this evening. There was an unease in the air today, that made every reassuring word he committed to paper curdle as he wrote it. Coot went to the window, back to Declan, and scratched his palms. They itched: maybe an attack of eczema again. If he could only speak; find some words to shape his distress. Never, in his forty-five years, had he felt so incapable of communication; and never in those years had it been so vital that he talk.

"Shall I go now?" Declan asked.

Coot shook his head.

"A moment longer. If you would."

He turned to the Verger. Declan Ewan was twenty-nine, though he had the face of a much older man. Bland, pale features: his hair receding prematurely.

What will this egg-face make of my revelation? thought Coot. He'll probably laugh. That's why I can't find the words, because I don't want to. I'm afraid of looking stupid. Here I am, a man of the cloth, dedicated to the Christian Mysteries. For the first time in forty odd years I've had a real glimpse of something, a vision maybe, and I'm scared of being laughed at. Stupid man, Coot, stupid, stupid man.

He took off his glasses. Declan's empty features became a blur. Now at least he didn't have to look at the smirking.

"Declan, this morning I had what I can only describe as a… as a…

visitation."

Declan said nothing, nor did the blur move.

"I don't quite know how to say this… our vocabulary's impoverished when it comes to these sorts of things… but frankly I've never had such a direct, such an unequivocal, manifestation of-"

Coot stopped. Did he mean God?

"God," he said, not sure that he did. Declan said nothing for a moment. Coot risked returning his glasses to their place. The egg hadn't cracked.

"Can you say what it was like?" Declan asked, his equilibrium absolutely unspoiled.

Coot shook his head; he'd been trying to find the words all day, but the phrases all seemed so predictable.

"What was it like?" Declan insisted.

Why didn't he understand that there were no words? I must try, thought Coot, I must.

"I was at the Altar after Morning Prayer…"he began, "and I felt something going through me. Like electricity almost. It made my hair stand on end. Literally on end."

Coot's hand was running through his short-cropped hair as he remembered the sensation. The hair standing bolt upright, like a field of grey-ginger corn. And that buzzing at the temples, in his lungs, at his groin. It had actually given him a hard-on; not that he was going to be able to tell Declan that. But he'd stood there at the Altar with an erection so powerful it was like discovering the joy of lust all over again.

"I won't claim… I can't claim it was our Lord God -"

(Though he wanted to believe that; that his God was the Lord of the Hard-on.) "- I can't even claim it was Christian. But something happened today. I felt it."

Declan's face was still impenetrable. Coot watched it for several seconds, impatient for its disdain.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Well what?"

"Nothing to say?"

The egg frowned for a moment, a furrow in its shell. Then it said: "God help us," almost in a whisper.

"What?"

"I felt it too. Not quite as you describe: not quite an electric shock. But something."

"Why God help us, Declan? Are you afraid of something?"

He made no reply.

"If you know something about these experiences that I don't… please tell me. I want to know, to understand. God, I have to understand."

Declan pursed his lips. "Well…" his eyes became more indecipherable than ever; and for the first time Coot caught a glimpse of a ghost behind Declan's eyes. Was it despair, perhaps?

"There's a lot of history to this place you know," he said, “a history of things… on this site."

Coot knew Declan had been delving into Zeal's history. Harmless enough pastime: the past was the past.

"There's been a settlement here for centuries, stretches back well before Roman occupation. No one knows how long. There's probably always been a temple on this site."

"Nothing odd about that." Coot offered up a smile, inviting Declan to reassure him. A part of him wanted to be told everything was well with his world: even if it was a lie.

Declan's face darkened. He had no reassurance to give. "And.there was a forest here. Huge. The Wild Woods." Was it still despair behind the eyes? Or was it nostalgia? "Not some tame little orchard. A forest you could lose a city in; full of beasts…"

"Wolves you mean? Bears?"

Declan shook his head.

There were things that owned this land. Before Christ. Before civilisation. Most of them didn't survive the destruction of their natural habitat: too primitive I suppose. But strong. Not like us; not human. Something else altogether."

"So what?"

"One of them survived as late as the fourteen hundreds. There's a carving of it being buried. It's on the Altar."

"On the Altar?"

"Underneath the cloth. I found it a while ago: never thought much of it. Till today. Today I… tried to touch it."

He produced his fist, and unclenched it. The flesh of his palm was blistered. Pus ran from the broken skin.

"It doesn't hurt," he said. "In fact it's quite numb. Serves me right, really. I should have known."

Coot's first thought was that the man was lying. His second was that there was some logical explanation. His third was his father's dictum: "Logic is the last refuge of a coward."

Declan was speaking again. This time he was seeping excitement.

They called it Rawhead."

"What?"

The beast they buried. It's in the history books. Rawhead it was called, because its head was huge, and the colour of the moon, and raw, like meat. Declan couldn't stop himself now. He was beginning to smile.

"It ate children," he said, and beamed like a baby about to receive its mother's tit.

It wasn't until early on the Saturday morning that the atrocity at the Nicholson Farm was discovered. Mick Glossop had been driving up to London, and he'd taken the road that ran beside the farm, ('Don't know why. Don't usually. Funny really.") and Nicholson's Friesian herd was kicking up a row at the gate, their udders distended. They'd clearly not been milked in twenty-four hours. Glossop had stopped his jeep on the road and gone into the yard.

The body of Denny Nicholson was already crawling with flies, though the sun had barely been up an hour. Inside the house the only remains of Amelia Nicholson were shreds of a dress and a casually discarded foot. Gwen Nicholson's unmutilated body lay at the bottom of the stairs. There was no sign of a wound or any sexual interference with the corpse.

By nine-thirty Zeal was swarming with police, and the shock of the incident registered on every face in the street. Though there were conflicting reports as to the state of the bodies there was no doubt of the brutality of the murders. Especially the child, dismembered presumably. Her body taken away by her killer for God knows what purpose.

The Murder Squad set up a Unit at "The Tall Man', while house to house interviews were conducted throughout the village. Nothing came immediately to light. No strangers seen in the locality; no more suspicious behaviour from anyone than was normal for a poacher or a bent building merchant. It was Enid Blatter, she of the ample bust and the motherly manner, who mentioned that she hadn't seen Thorn Garrow for over twenty-four hours.

They found him where his killer had left him, the worse for a few hours of picking. Worms at his head and gulls at his legs. The flesh of his shins, where his trousers had slid out of his boots, was pecked to the bone. When he was dug up families of refugee lice scurried from his ears.

The atmosphere in the hotel that night was subdued. In the bar Detective Sergeant Gissing, down from London to head the investigation, had found a willing ear in Ron Milton. He was glad to be conversing with a fellow Londoner, and Milton kept them both in Scotch and water for the best part of three hours.

"Twenty years in the force," Gissing kept repeating, “and I've never seen anything like it."

Which wasn't strictly true. There'd been that whore (or selected highlights thereof) he'd found in a suitcase at Euston's left luggage department, a good decade ago. And the addict who'd taken it upon himself to hypnotise a polar bear at London Zoo: he'd been a sight for sore eyes when they dredged him out of the pool. He'd seen a good deal, had Stanley Gissing "But this… never seen anything like it," he insisted. "Fair made me want to puke."

Ron wasn't quite sure why he listened to Gissing; it was just something to while the night away. Ron, who'd been a radical in his younger days, had never liked policemen much, and there was some quirky satisfaction to be had from getting this self-satisfied prat pissed out of his tiny skull.

"He's a fucking lunatic," Gissing said, “You can take my word for it. We'll have him easy. A man like that isn't in control, you see. Doesn't bother to cover his tracks, doesn't even care if he lives or dies. God knows, any man who can tear a seven-year-old girl to shreds like that, he's on the verge of going bang. Seen 'em."

"Yes?"

"Oh yes. Seen 'em weep like children, blood all over 'em like they was just out of the abattoir, and tears on their faces. Pathetic."

"So, you'll have him."

"Like that," said Gissing, and snapped his fingers. He got to his feet, a little unsteadily, "Sure as God made little apples, we'll have him." He glanced at his watch and then at the empty glass.

Ron made no further offers of refills.

"Well," said Gissing," I must be getting back to town. Put in my report."

He swayed to the door and left Milton to the bill.

Rawhead watched Gissing's car crawl out of the village and along the north road, the headlights making very little impression on the night. The noise of the engine made Rawhead nervous though, as it over-revved up the hill past the Nicholson Farm. It roared and coughed like no beast he had encountered before, and somehow the homosapiens had control of it. If the Kingdom was to be taken back from the usurpers, sooner or later he would have to best one of these beasts. Rawhead swallowed his fear and prepared for the confrontation.

The moon grew teeth.

In the back of the car Stanley was near as damnit asleep, dreaming of little girls. In his dreams these charming nymphettes were climbing a ladder on their way to bed, and he was on duty beside the ladder watching them climb, catching glimpses of their slightly soiled

knickers as they disappeared into the sky. It was a familiar dream, one that he would never have admitted to, not even drunk. Not that he was ashamed exactly; he knew for a fact many of his colleagues entertained peccadilloes every bit as off-beat as, and some a good deal less savoury than, his. But he was possessive of it: it was his particular dream, and he wasn't about to share it with anyone.

In the driving seat the young officer who had been chauffeuring Gissing around for the best part of six months was waiting for the old man to fall well and truly asleep. Then and only then could he risk turning the radio on to catch up with the cricket scores. Australia were well down in the Test: a late rally seemed unlikely. Ah, now there was a career, he thought as he drove. Beats this routine into a cocked hat.

Both lost in their reveries, driver and passenger, neither caught sight of Rawhead. He was stalking the car now, his giant's stride easily keeping pace with it as it navigated the winding, unlit road.

All at once his anger flared, and roaring, he left the field for the tarmac.

The driver swerved to avoid the immense form that skipped into the burning headlights, its mouth issuing a howl like a pack of rabid dogs.

The car skidded on the wet ground, its left wing grazing the bushes that ran along the side of the road, a tangle of branches lashing the windscreen as it careered on its way. On the back seat Gissing fell off the ladder he was climbing, just as the car came to the end of its hedgerow tour and met an iron gate. Gissing was flung against the front seat, winded but uninjured. The impact took the driver over the wheel and through the window in two short seconds. His feet, now in Gissing's face, twitched.

From the road Rawhead watched the death of the metal box. Its tortured voice, the howl of its wrenched flank, the shattering of its face, frightened him. But it was dead. He waited a few cautious moments before advancing up the road to sniff the crumpled body. There was an aromatic smell in the air, which pricked his sinuses, and the cause of it, the blood of the box, was dribbling out of its broken torso, and running away down the road. Certain now that it must be finished, he approached.

There was someone alive in the box. None of the sweet child-flesh he savoured so much, just tough male-meat. It was a comical face that

peered at him. Round, wild eyes. Its silly mouth opened and closed like a fish's. He kicked the box to make it open, and when that didn't work he wrenched off the doors. Then he reached and drew the whimpering male out of his refuge. Was this one of the species that had subdued him? This fearful mite, with its jelly-lips? He laughed at its pleas, then turned Gissing on his head, and held him upside down by one foot. He waited until the cries died down, then reached between the twitching legs and found the mite's manhood. Not large. Quite shrunk, in fact, by fear. Gissing was blathering all kinds of stuff: none of it made any sense. The only sound Rawhead understood from the mouth of the man was this sound he was hearing now, this high-pitched shriek that always attended a gelding. Once finished, he dropped Gissing beside the car.

A fire had begun in the smashed engine, he could smell it. He was not so much a beast that he feared fire. Respected it yes: but not feared. Fire was a tool, he'd used it many times: to burn out enemies, to cremate them in their beds.

Now he stepped back from the car as the flame found the petrol and fire erupted into the air. Heat bailed towards him, and he smelt the hair on the front of his body crisp, but he was too entranced by the spectacle not to look. The fire followed the blood of the beast, consuming Gissing, and licking along the rivers of petrol like an eager dog after a trail of piss. Rawhead watched, and learned a new and lethal lesson.

In the chaos of his study Coot was unsuccessfully fighting off sleep. He'd spent a good deal of the evening at the Altar, some of it with Declan. Tonight there'd be no praying, just sketching. Now he had a copy of the Altar carving on his desk in front of him, and he'd spent an hour just staring at it. The exercise had been fruitless. Either the carving was too ambiguous, or his imagination lacked breadth. Whichever, he could make very little sense of the image. It pictured a burial certainly, but that was about all he was able to work out. Maybe the body was a little bigger than that of the mourners, but nothing exceptional. He thought of Zeal's pub, The Tall Man', and smiled. It might well have pleased some Mediaeval wit to picture the burial of a brewer under the Altar cloth.

In the hall, the sick clock struck twelve-fifteen, which meant it was almost one. Coot got up from his desk, stretched, and switched off the lamp. He was surprised by the brilliance of the moonlight streaming through the crack in the curtain. It was a full, harvest moon, and the light, though cold, was luxuriant.

He put the guard in front of the fire, and stepped into the darkened hallway, closing the door behind him. The clock ticked loudly. Somewhere over towards Goudhurst, he heard the sound of an ambulance siren.

What's happening? He wondered, and opened the front door to see what he could see. There were car headlights on the hill, and the distant throb of blue police lights, more rhythmical than the ticking at his back. Accident on the north road. Early for ice, and surely not cold enough. He watched the lights, set on the hill like jewels on the back of a whale, winking away. It was quite chilly, come to think of it. No weather to be standing in the He frowned; something caught his eye, a movement in the far corner of the churchyard, underneath the trees. The moonlight etched the scene in monochrome. Black yews, grey stones, a white chrysanthemum strewing its petals on a grave. And black in the shadow of the yews, but outlined clearly against the slab of a marble tomb beyond, a giant.

Coot stepped out of the house in slippered feet.

The giant was not alone. Somebody was kneeling in front of it, a smaller, more human shape, its face raised and clear in the light. It was Declan. Even from a distance it was clear that he was smiling up at his master.

Coot wanted to get closer; a better look at the nightmare. As he took his third step his foot crunched on a piece of gravel.

The giant seemed to shift in the shadows. Was it turning to look at him? Coot chewed on his heart. No, let it be deaf; please God, let it not see me, make me invisible.

The prayer was apparently answered. The giant made no sign of having seen his approach. Taking courage Coot advanced across the pavement of gravestones, dodging from tomb to tomb for cover, barely daring to breathe. He was within a few feet of the tableau now and he could see the way the creature's head was bowed towards Declan; he could hear the sound like sandpaper on stone it was making at the back of its throat. But there was more to the scene.

Declan's vestments were torn and dirtied, his thin chest bare. Moonlight caught his sternum, his ribs. His state, and his position, were unequivocal. This was adoration – pure and simple. Then Coot heard the splashing; he stepped closer and saw that the giant was directing a glistening rope of its urine onto Declan's upturned face. It

splashed into his slackly opened mouth, it ran over his torso. The gleam of joy didn't leave Declan's eyes for a moment as he received this baptism, indeed he turned his head from side to side in his eagerness to be totally defiled.

The smell of the creature's discharge wafted across to Coot. It was acidic, vile. How could Declan bear to have a drop of it on him, much less bathe in it? Coot wanted to cry out, stop the depravity, but even in the shadow of the yew the shape of the beast was terrifying. It was too tall and too broad to be human.

This was surely the Beast of the Wild Woods Declan had been trying to describe; this was the child-devourer. Had Declan guessed, when he eulogised about this monster, what power it would have over his imagination? Had he known all along that if the beast were to come sniffing for him he'd kneel in front of it, call it Lord (before Christ, before Civilisation, he'd said), let it discharge its bladder on to him, and smile?

Yes. Oh yes.

And so let him have his moment. Don't risk your neck for him, Coot thought, he's where he wants to be. Very slowly he backed off towards the Vestry, his eyes still fixed on the degradation in front of him. The baptism dribbled to a halt, but Declan's hands, cupped in front of him, still held a quantity of fluid. He put the heels of his hands to his mouth, and drank.

Coot gagged, unable to prevent himself. For an instant he closed his eyes to shut out the sight, and opened them again to see that the shadowy head had turned towards him and was looking at him with eyes that burned in the blackness.

"Christ Almighty."

It saw him. For certain this time, it saw him. It roared, and its head changed shape in the shadow, its mouth opened so horribly wide. "Sweet Jesus."

Already it was charging towards him, antelope-lithe, leaving its acolyte slumped beneath the tree. Coot turned and ran, ran as he hadn't in many a long year, hurdling the graves as he fled. It was just a few yards: the door, some kind of safety. Not for long maybe, but time to think, to find a weapon. Run, you old bastard. Christ the race, Christ the prize. Four yards.

Run.

The door was open.

Almost there; a yard to go He crossed the threshold and swung round to slam the door on his pursuer. But no! Rawhead had shot his hand through the door, a hand three times the size of a human hand. It was snatching at the empty air, trying to find Coot, the roars relentless.

Coot threw his full weight against the oak door. The door stile, edged with iron, bit into Rawhead's forearm. The roar became a howl: venom and agony mingled in a din that was heard from one end of Zeal to the other.

It stained the night up as far as the north road, where the remains of Gissing and his driver were being scraped up and parceled in plastic. It echoed round the icy walls of the Chapel of Rest where Denny and Gwen Nicholson were already beginning to degenerate. It was heard too in the bedrooms of Zeal, where living couples lay side by side, maybe an arm numbed under the other's body; where the old lay awake working out the geography of the ceiling; where children dreamt of the womb, and babies mourned it. It was heard again and again and again as Rawhead raged at the door.

The howl made Coot's head swim. His mouth babbled prayers, but the much needed support from on high showed no sign of coming. He felt his strength ebbing away. The giant was steadily gaining access, pressing the door open inch by inch. Coot's feet slid on the too-well-polished floor, his muscles were fluttering as they faltered. This was a contest he had no chance of winning, not if he tried to match his strength to that of the beast, sinew for sinew. If he was to see tomorrow morning, he needed some strategy.

Coot pressed harder against the wood, his eyes darting around the hallway looking for a weapon. It mustn't get in: it mustn't have mastery over him. A bitter smell was in his nostrils. For a moment he saw himself naked and kneeling in front of the giant, with its piss beating on his skull. Hard on the heels of that picture, came another flurry of depravities. It was all he could do not to let it in, let the obscenities get a permanent hold. Its mind was working its way into his, a thick wedge of filth pressing its way through his memories, encouraging buried thoughts to the surface. Wouldn't it ask for worship, just like any God? And wouldn't its demands be plain, and real? Not ambiguous, like those of the Lord he'd served up 'til now.

That was a fine thought: to give himself up to this certainty that beat on the other side of the door, and lie open in front of it, and let it ravage him.

Rawhead. Its name was a pulse in his ear – Raw. Head.

In desperation, knowing his fragile mental defences were within an ace of collapsing, his eyes alighted on the clothes stand to the left of the door.

Raw. Head. Raw. Head. The name was an imperative. Raw. Head. Raw. Head. It evoked a skinned head, its defences peeled back, a thing close to bursting, no telling if it was pain or pleasure. But easy to find out. It almost had possession of him, he knew it: it was now or never. He took one arm from the door and stretched towards the rack for a walking-stick. There was one amongst them he wanted in particular. He called it his-cross-country stick, a yard and a half of stripped ash, well used and resilient. His fingers coaxed it towards him.

Rawhead had taken advantage of the lack of force behind the door; its leathery arm was working its way in, indifferent to the way the door jamb scored the skin. The hand, its fingers strong as steel, had caught the folds of Coot's jacket.

Coot raised the ash stick and brought it down on Rawhead's elbow, where the bone was vulnerably close to the surface. The weapon splintered on impact, but it did its job. On the other side of the door the howl began again, and Rawhead's arm was rapidly withdrawn. As the fingers slid out Coot slammed the door and bolted it. There was a short hiatus, seconds only, before the attack began again, this time a two-fisted beating on the door. The hinges began to buckle; the wood groaned. It would be a short time, a very short time, before it gained access. It was strong; and now it was furious too.

Coot crossed the hall and picked up the phone. Police, he said, and began to dial. How long before it put two and two together, gave up on the door, and moved to the windows? They were leaded, but that wouldn't keep it out for long. He had minutes at the most, probably seconds, depending on its brain power.

His mind, loosed from Rawhead's grasp, was a chorus of fragmented prayers and demands. If I die, he found himself thinking, will I be rewarded in Heaven for dying more brutally than any country vicar might reasonably expect? Is there compensation in paradise for being disemboweled in the front hall of your own Vestry?

There was only one officer left on duty at the Police Station: the rest were up on the north road, clearing up after Gissing's party. The poor man could make very little sense of Reverend Coot's pleas, but there was no mistaking the sound of splintering wood that accompanied the babbles, nor the howling in the background.

The officer put the phone down and radioed for help. The patrol on the north road took twenty, maybe twenty-five seconds to answer. In that time Rawhead had smashed the central panel of the Vestry door, and was now demolishing the rest. Not that the patrol knew that. After the sights they'd faced up there, the chauffeur's charred body, Gissing's missing manhood, they had become insolent with experience, like hour-old war veterans. It took the officer at the Station a good minute to convince them of the urgency in Coot's voice. In that time Rawhead had gained access.

In the hotel Ron Milton watched the parade of lights blinking on the hill, heard the sirens, and Rawhead's howls, and was besieged by doubts. Was this really the quiet country village he had intended to settle himself and his family in? He looked down at Maggie, who had been woken by the noise but was now asleep again, her bottle of sleeping tablets almost empty on the bedside cabinet. He felt, though she would have laughed at him for it, protective towards her: he wanted to be her hero. She was the one who took the self-defence night classes however, while he grew overweight on expense account lunches. It made him inexplicably sad to watch her sleep, knowing he had so little power over life and death.

Rawhead stood in the hall of the Vestry in a confetti of shattered wood. His torso was pin-pricked with splinters, and dozens of tiny wounds bled down his heaving bulk. His sour sweat permeated the hail like incense.

He sniffed the air for the man, but he was nowhere near. Rawhead bared his teeth in frustration, expelling a thin whistle of air from the back of his throat, and loped down the hall towards the study. There was warmth there, his nerves could feel it at twenty yards, and there was comfort too. He overturned the desk and shattered two of the chairs, partly to make more room for himself, mostly out of sheer destructiveness, then threw away the fire guard and sat down. Warmth surrounded him: healing, living warmth. He luxuriated in the sensation as it embraced his face, his lean belly, his limbs. He felt it heat his blood too, and so stir memories of other fires, fires he'd set in fields of burgeoning wheat.

And he recalled another fire, the memory of which his mind tried to dodge and duck, but he couldn't avoid thinking about it: the humiliation of that night would be with him forever. They'd picked their season so carefully: high summer, and no rain in two months. The undergrowth of the Wild Woods was tinder dry, even the living tree caught the flame easily. He had been flushed out of his fortress with streaming eyes, confused and fearful, to be met with spikes and nets on every side, and that… thing they had, that sight that could subdue him.

Of course they weren't courageous enough to kill him; they were too superstitious for that. Besides, didn't they recognise his authority, even as they wounded him, their terror a homage to it? So they buried him alive: and that was worse than death. Wasn't that the very worst? Because he could live an age, ages, and never die, not even locked in the earth. Just left to wait a hundred years, and suffer, and another hundred and another, while the generations walked the ground above his head and lived and died and forgot him. Perhaps the women didn't forget him: he could smell them even through the earth, when they came close to his grave, and though they might not have known it they felt anxious, they persuaded their men to abandon the place altogether, so he was left absolutely alone, with not even a gleaner for company. Loneliness was their revenge on him, he thought, for the times he and his brothers had taken women into the woods, spread them out, spiked and loosed them again, bleeding but fertile. They would die having the children of those rapes; no woman's anatomy could survive the thrashing of a hybrid, its teeth, its anguish. That was the only revenge he and his brothers ever had on the big-bellied sex. Rawhead stroked himself and looked up at the gilded reproduction of The Light of the World' that hung above Coot's mantelpiece. The image woke no tremors of fear or remorse in him: it was a picture of a sexless martyr, doe-eyed and woebegone. No challenge there. The true power, the only power that could defeat him, was apparently gone: lost beyond recall, its place usurped by a virgin shepherd. He ejaculated, silently, his thin semen hissing on the hearth. The world was his to rule unchallenged. He would have warmth, and food in abundance. Babies even. Yes, baby-meat, that was the best. Just dropped mites, still blind from the womb.

He stretched, sighing in anticipation of that delicacy, his brain awash with atrocities.

From his refuge in the crypt Coot heard the police cars squealing to a halt outside the Vestry, then the sound of feet on the gravel path. He judged there to be at least half a dozen. It would be enough, surely.

Cautiously he moved through the darkness towards the stairs.

Something touched him: he almost yelled, biting his tongue a moment before the cry escaped.

"Don't go now," a voice said from behind him. It was Declan, and he was speaking altogether too loudly for comfort. The thing was above them, somewhere, it would hear them if he wasn't careful. Oh God, it mustn't hear.

"It's up above us," said Coot in a whisper.

"I know."

The voice seemed to come from his bowels not from his throat; it was bubbled through filth.

"Let's have him come down here shall we? He wants you, you know. He wants me to -"

"What's happened to you?"

Declan's face was just visible in the dark. It grinned; lunatic.

"I think he might want to baptise you too. How'd you like that? Like that would you? He pissed on me: you see him? And that wasn't all. Oh no, he wants more than that. He wants everything. Hear me? Everything."

Declan grabbed hold of Coot, a bear-hug that stank of the creature's urine.

"Come with me?" he leered in Coot's face.

"I put my trust in God." Declan laughed. Not a hollow laugh; there was genuine compassion in it for this lost soul.

"He is God," he said. "He was here before this fucking shit-house was built, you know that." "So were dogs." "Uh?"

"Doesn't mean I'd let them cock their legs on me." "Clever old fucker aren't you?" said Declan, the smile inverted. "He'll show you. You'll change." "No, Declan. Let go of me -" The embrace was too strong.

"Come on up the stairs, fuck-face. Mustn't keep God waiting." He pulled Coot up the stairs, arms still locked round him. Words, all logical argument, eluded Coot: was there nothing he could say to

make the man see his degradation? They made an ungainly entrance into the Church, and Coot automatically looked towards the altar, hoping for some reassurance, but he got none. The altar had been desecrated. The cloths had been torn and smeared with excrement, the cross and candlesticks were in the middle of a fire of prayer-books that burned healthily on the altar steps. Smuts floated around the Church, the air was grimy with smoke. "You did this?" Declan grunted.

"He wants me to destroy it all. Take it apart stone by stone if I have to."

"He wouldn't dare."

"Oh he'd dare. He's not scared of Jesus, he's not scared of…" The certainty lapsed for a telling instant, and Coot leapt on the hesitation.

There's something here he is scared of, though, isn't there, or he'd have come in here himself, done it all himself…" Declan wasn't looking at Coot. His eyes had glazed. "What is it, Declan? What is it he doesn't like? You can tell me-”

Declan spat in Coot's face, a wad of thick phlegm that hung on his cheek like a slug.

"None of your business."

"In the name of Christ, Declan, look at what he's done to you.". "I know my master when I see him” – Declan was shaking – “and so will you."

He turned Coot round to face the south door. It was open, and the creature was there on the threshold, stooping gracefully to duck under the porch. For the first time Coot saw Rawhead in a good light, and the terrors began in earnest. He had avoided thinking too much of its size, its stare, its origins. Now, as it came towards him with slow, even stately steps, his heart conceded its mastery. It was no mere beast, despite its mane, and its awesome array of teeth; its eyes lanced him through and through, gleaming with a depth of contempt no animal could ever muster. Its mouth opened wider and wider, the teeth gliding from the gums, two, three inches long, and still the mouth was gaping wider. When there was nowhere to run, Declan let Coot go. Not that Coot could have moved anyway: the stare was too insistent. Rawhead reached out and picked Coot up. The world turned on its head. There were seven officers, not six as Coot had guessed. Three of them were armed, their weapons brought down from London on the order of Detective Sergeant Gissing. The late, soon to be decorated

posthumously, Detective Sergeant Gissing. They were led, these seven good men and true, by Sergeant Ivanhoe Baker. Ivanhoe was not an heroic man, either by inclination or education. His voice, which he had prayed would give the appropriate orders when the time came without betraying him, came out as a strangled yelp as Rawhead appeared from the interior of the Church.

"I can see it!" he said. Everybody could: it was nine feet tall, covered in blood, and it looked like Hell on legs. Nobody needed it pointed out. The guns were raised without Ivanhoe's instruction: and the unarmed men, suddenly feeling naked, kissed their truncheons and prayed. One of them ran.

"Hold your ground!" Ivanhoe shrieked; if those sons of bitches turned tail he'd be left on his own. They hadn't issued him with a gun, just authority, and that was not much comfort.

Rawhead was still holding Coot up, at arm's length, by the neck. The Reverend's legs dangled a foot above the ground, his head lolled back, his eyes were closed. The monster displayed the body for his enemies, proof of power.

"Shall we… please… can we… shoot the bastard?" One of the gunmen inquired. Ivanhoe swallowed before answering. "We'll hit the vicar." "He's dead already." said the gunman. "We don't know that." "He must be dead. Look at him -"

Rawhead was shaking Coot like an eiderdown, and his stuffing was falling out, much to Ivanhoe's intense disgust. Then, almost lazily, Rawhead flung Coot at the police. The body hit the gravel a little way from the gate and lay still. Ivanhoe found his voice -"Shoot!"

The gunmen needed no encouragement; their fingers were depressing the triggers before the syllable was out of his mouth. Rawhead was hit by three, four, five bullets in quick succession, most of them in the chest. They stung him and he put up an arm to protect his face, covering his balls with the other hand. This was a pain he hadn't anticipated. The wound he'd received from Nicholson's rifle had been forgotten in the bliss of the blood-letting that came soon after, but these barbs hurt him, and they kept coming. He felt a twinge of fear. His instinct was to fly in the face of these popping, flashing rods, but the pain was too much. Instead, he turned and made his retreat, leaping over the tombs as he fled towards the safety of the hills. There were copses he knew, burrows and caves, where he could hide and find time to think this new problem through. But first he had to elude

them.

They were after him quickly, flushed with the ease of their victory, leaving Ivanhoe to find a vase on one of the graves, empty it of chrysanthemums, and be sick.

Out of the dip there were no lights along the road, and Rawhead began to feel safer. He could melt into the darkness, into the earth, he'd done it a thousand times. He cut across a field. The barley was still unharvested, and heavy with its grain. He trampled it as he ran, grinding seed and stalk. At his back his pursuers were already losing the chase. The car they'd piled into had stopped in the road, he could see its lights, one blue, two white, way behind him. The enemy was shouting a confusion of orders, words Rawhead didn't understand. No matter; he knew men. They were easily frightened. They would not look far for him tonight; they'd use the dark as an excuse to call off the search, telling themselves that his wounds were probably fatal anyhow. Trusting children that they were. He climbed to the top of the hill and looked down into the valley. Below the snake of the road, its eyes the headlights of the enemy's car, the village was a wheel of warm light, with flashing blues and reds at its hub. Beyond, in every direction, the impenetrable black of the hills, over which the stars hung in loops and clusters. By day this would seem a counterpane valley, toy town small. By night it was fathomless, more his than theirs.

His enemies were already returning to their hovels, as he'd known they would. The chase was over for the night.

He lay down on the earth and watched a meteor burn up as it fell to the south-west. It was a brief, bright streak, which edge-lit a cloud, then went out. Morning was many long, healing hours in the future. He would soon be strong again: and then, then – he'd burn them all away.

Coot was not dead: but so close to death it scarcely made any difference. Eighty per cent of the bones in his body were fractured or broken: his face and neck were a maze of lacerations: one of his hands was crushed almost beyond recognition. He would certainly die. It was purely a matter of time and inclination.

In the village those who had glimpsed so much as a fragment of the events in the dip were already elaborating on their stories: and the evidence of the naked eye lent credence to the most fantastic inventions. The chaos in the churchyard, the smashed door of the

Vestry: the cordoned-off car on the north road, whatever had happened that Saturday night it was going to take a long time to forget.

There was no harvest festival service, which came as no surprise to anyone.

Maggie was insistent: "I want us all to go back to London."

"A day ago you wanted us to stay here. Got to be part of the community."

"That was on Friday, before all this… this… There's a maniac loose, Ron."

"If we go now, we won't come back."

"What are you talking about; of course we'll come back."

"If we leave once the place is threatened, we give up on it altogether."

"That's ridiculous."

"You were the one who was so keen on us being visible, being seen to join in village life. Well, we'll have to join in the deaths too. And I'm going to stay – see it through. You can go back to London. Take the kids."

"No."

He sighed, heavily.

"I want to see him caught: whoever he is. I want to know it's all been cleared up, see it with my own eyes. That's the only way we'll ever feel safe here." Reluctantly, she nodded.

"At least let's get out of the hotel for a while. Mrs. Blatter's going loopy. Can't we go for a drive? Get some air -"

"Yes, why not?"

It was a balmy September day: the countryside, always willing to spring a surprise, was gleaming with life. Late flowers shone in the roadside hedges, birds dipped over the road as they drove. The sky was azure, the clouds a fantasia in cream. A few miles outside the village all the horrors of the previous night began to evaporate and

the sheer exuberance of the day began to raise the family's spirits. With every mile they drove out of Zeal Ron's fears diminished. Soon, he was singing.

On the back seat Debbie was being difficult. One moment "I'm hot Daddy', the next: "I want an orange juice Daddy'; the next: "I have to pee'.

Ron stopped the car on an empty stretch of road, and played the indulgent father. The kids had been through a lot; today they could be spoiled.

"All right, darling, you can have a pee here, then we'll go and find an ice-cream for you."

"Where's the la-la?" she said. Damn stupid phrase; mother-in-law's euphemism.

Maggie chipped in. She was better with Debbie in these moods than Ron. "You can go behind the hedge," she said. Debbie looked horrified. Ron exchanged a half-smile with Ian. The boy had a put-upon look on his face. Grimacing, he went back to his dog-eared comic.

"Hurry up, can't you?" he muttered. "Then we can go somewhere proper."

Somewhere proper, thought Ron. He means a town. He's a city kid: its going to take a while to convince him that a hill with a view is somewhere proper. Debbie was still being difficult.

"I can't go here Mummy -“ "Why not?"

"Somebody might see me."

"Nobody's going to see you darling," Ron reassured her. "Now do as your Mummy says." He turned to Maggie, "Go with her, love."

Maggie wasn't budging. "She's OK."

"She can't climb over the gate on her own." "Well you go, then." Ron was determined not to argue; he forced a smile. "Come on," he said.

Debbie got out of the car and Ron helped her over the iron gate into the field beyond. It was already harvested. It smelt… earthy. "Don't look," she admonished him, wide-eyed, “you mustn't look."

She was already a manipulator, at the ripe old age of nine. She

could play him better than the piano she was taking lessons on. He knew it, and so did she. He smiled at her and closed his eyes. "All right. See? I've got my eyes closed. Now hurry up, Debbie. Please."

"Promise you won't peek."

"I won't peek'. My God, he thought, she's certainly making a production number out of this. "Hurry up."

He glanced back towards the car. Ian was sitting in the back, still reading, engrossed in some cheap heroics, his face set as he stared into the adventure. The boy was so serious: the occasional half-smile was all Ron could ever win from him. It wasn't a put-on, it wasn't a fake air of mystery. He seemed content to leave all the performing to his sister.

Behind the hedge Debbie pulled down her Sunday knickers and squatted, but after all the fuss her pee wouldn't come. She concentrated but that just made it worse.

Ron looked up the field towards the horizon. There were gulls up there, squabbling over a tit-bit. He watched them awhile, impatience growing.

"Come on love," he said.

He looked back at the car, and Ian was watching him now, his face slack with boredom; or something like it. Was there something else there: a deep resignation? Ron thought. The boy looked back to his comic book "Utopia' without acknowledging his father's gaze.

Then Debbie screamed: an ear-piercing shriek.

"Christ!" Ron was clambering over the gate in an instant, and Maggie wasn't far behind him.

"Debbie!"

Ron found her standing against the hedge, staring at the ground, blubbering, face red. "What's wrong, for God's sake?"

She was jabbering incoherently. Ron followed her eye.

"What's happened?" Maggie was having difficulty getting over the gate.

"It's all right… it's all right."

There was a dead mole almost buried in the tangle at the edge of the field, its eyes pecked out, its rotting hide crawling with flies.

"Oh God, Ron." Maggie looked at him accusingly, as though he'd put the damn thing there with malice aforethought.

"It's all right, sweetheart," she said, elbowing past her husband and wrapping Debbie up in her arms.

Her sobs quietened a bit. City kids, thought Ron. They're going to have to get used to that sort of thing if they're going to live in the country. No road-sweepers here to brush up the run-over cats every morning. Maggie was rocking her, and the worst of the tears were apparently over.

"She'll be all right," Ron said.

"Of course she will, won't you, darling?" Maggie helped her pull up her knickers. She was still sniveling, her need for privacy forgotten in her unhappiness.

In the back of the car Ian listened to his sister's caterwauling and tried to concentrate on his comic. Anything for attention, he thought. Well, she's welcome.

Suddenly, it went dark.

He looked up from the page, his heart loud. At his shoulder, six inches away from him, something stooped to peer into the car, its face like Hell. He couldn't scream, his tongue refused to move. All he could do was flood the seat and kick uselessly as the long, scarred arms reached through the window towards him. The nails of the beast gouged his ankles, tore his sock. One of his new shoes fell off in the struggle. Now it had his foot and he was being dragged across the wet seat towards the window. He found his voice. Not quite to voice, it was a pathetic, a silly-sounding voice, not the equal of the mortal terror he felt. And all too late anyway; it was dragging his legs through the window, and his bottom was almost through now. He looked through the back window as it hauled his torso into the open air and in a dream he saw Daddy at the gate, his face looking so, so ridiculous. He was climbing the gate, coming to help, coming to save him but he was far too slow. Ian knew he was beyond salvation from the beginning, because he'd died this way in his sleep on a hundred occasions and Daddy never got there in time. The mouth was wider even than he'd dreamed it, a hole which he was being delivered into, head first. It smelt like the dustbins at the back of the school canteen,

times a million. He was sick down its throat, as it bit the top of his head off.

Ron had never screamed in his life. The scream had always belonged to the other sex, until that instant. Then, watching the monster stand up and close its jaws around his son's head, there was no sound appropriate but a scream.

Rawhead heard the cry, and turned, without a trace of fear on his face, to look at the source. Their eyes met. The King's glance penetrated Milton like a spike, freezing him to the road and to the marrow. It was Maggie who broke its hold, her voice a dirge.

"Oh… please… no."

Ron shook Rawhead's look from his head, and started towards the car, towards his son. But the hesitation had given Rawhead a moment's grace he scarcely needed anyway, and he was already away, his catch clamped between his jaws, spilling out to right and left. The breeze carried motes of lan's blood back down the road towards Ron; he felt them spot his face in a gentle shower.

Declan stood in the chancel of St Peter's and listened for the hum. It was still there. Sooner or later he'd have to go to the source of that sound and destroy it, even if it meant, as it well might, his own death. His new master would demand it. But that was par for the course; and the thought of death didn't distress him; far from it. In the last few days he'd realised ambitions that he'd nurtured (unspoken, even unthought) for years.

Looking up at the black bulk of the monster as it rained piss on him he'd found the purest joy. If that experience, which would once have disgusted him, could be so consummate, what might death be like? rarer still. And if he could contrive to die by Rawhead's hand, by that wide hand that smelt so rank, wouldn't that be the rarest of the rare?

He looked up at the altar, and at the remains of the fire the police had extinguished. They'd searched for him after Coot's death, but he had a dozen hiding places they would never find, and they'd soon given up. Bigger fish to fry. He collected a fresh armful of Songs of Praise and threw them down amongst the damp ashes. The candlesticks were warped, but still recognisable. The cross had disappeared, either shriveled away or removed by some light-fingered officer of the law. He tore a few handfuls of hymns from the books, and lit a match. The old songs caught easily.

Ron Milton was tasting tears, and it was a taste he'd forgotten. It was many years since he'd wept, especially in front of other males. But he didn't care any longer: these bastard policemen weren't human anyway. They just looked at him while he poured out his story, and nodded like idiots.

"We've drafted men in from every division within fifty miles, Mr. Milton," said the bland face with the understanding eyes. "The hills are being scoured. We'll have it, whatever it is."

"It took my child, you understand me? It killed him, in front of me-"

They didn't seem to appreciate the horror of it all.

"We're doing what we can."

"It's not enough. This thing… it's not human."

Ivanhoe, with the understanding eyes, knew bloody well how unhuman it was.

There's people coming from the Ministry of Defence: we can't do much more 'til they've had a look at the evidence," he said. Then added, as a sop: "It's all public money sir."

"You fucking idiot! What does it matter what it costs to kill it? It's not human. It's out of Hell."

Ivanhoe's look lost compassion.

"If it came out of Hell, sir," he said, "I don't think it would have found the Reverend Coot such easy pickings."

Coot: that was his man. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Coot.

Ron had never been much of a man of God. But he was prepared to be open-minded, and now that he'd seen the opposition, or one of its troops, he was ready to reform his opinions. He'd believe anything, anything at all, if it gave him a weapon against the Devil. He must get to Coot.

"What about your wife?" the officer called after him. Maggie was sitting in one of the side-offices, dumb with sedation, Debbie asleep beside her. There was nothing he could do for them. They were as safe here as anywhere. He must get to Coot, before he died.

He'd know, whatever Reverends know; and he'd understand the pain

better than these monkeys. Dead sons were the crux of the Church after all.

As he got into the car it seemed for a moment he smelt his son: the boy who would have carried his name (Ian Ronald Milton he'd been christened), the boy who was his sperm made flesh, who he'd had circumcised like himself. The quiet child who'd looked out of the car at him with such resignation in his eyes. This time the tears didn't begin. This time there was just an anger that was almost wonderful.

It was half past eleven at night. Rawhead Rex lay under the moon in one of the harvested fields to the south-west of the Nicholson Farm. The stubble was darkening now, and there was a tantalising smell of rotting vegetable matter off the earth. Beside him lay his dinner, Ian Ronald Milton, face up on the field, his midriff torn open. Occasionally the beast would lean up on one elbow and paddle its fingers in the cooling soup of the boy-child's body, fishing for a delicacy.

Here, under the full moon, bathing in silver, stretching his limbs and eating the flesh of human kind, he felt irresistible. His fingers drew a kidney off the plate beside him and he swallowed it whole.

Sweet.

Coot was awake, despite the sedation. He knew he was dying, and the time was too precious to doze through. He didn't know the name of the face that was interrogating him in the yellow gloom of his room, but the voice was so politely insistent he had to listen, even though it interrupted his peace-making with God. Besides, they had questions in common: and they all circled, those questions, on the beast that had reduced him to this pulp.

"It took my son," the man said. "What do you know about the thing? Please tell me. I'll believe whatever you tell me – “ Now there was desperation – "Just explain -”

Time and again, as he'd lain on that hot pillow, confused thoughts had raced through Coot's mind. Declan's baptism; the embrace of the beast; the altar; his hair rising and his flesh too. Maybe there was something he could tell the father at his bedside.

"… in the church…"

Ron leaned closer to Coot; he smelt of earth already.

"… the altar… it's afraid… the altar…"

"You mean the cross? It's afraid of the cross?"

"No…not-”

"Not-”

The body creaked once, and stopped. Ron watched death come over the face: the saliva dry on Coot's lips, the iris of his remaining eye contract. He watched a long while before he rang for the nurse, then quietly made his escape.

There was somebody in the Church. The door, which had been padlocked by the police, was ajar, the lock smashed. Ron pushed it open a few inches and slid inside. There were no lights on in the Church, the only illumination was a bonfire on the altar steps. It was being tended by a young man Ron had seen on and off in the village. He looked up from his fire-watching, but kept feeding the flames the guts of books.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, without interest.

"I came to -” Ron hesitated. What to tell this man: the truth? No, there was something wrong here.

"I asked you a frigging question," said the man. "What do you want?"

As he walked down the aisle towards the fire Ron began to see the questioner in more detail. There were stains, like mud, on his clothes, and his eyes had sunk in their orbits as if his brain had sucked them in.

"You've got no right to be in here -”

"I thought anyone could come into a church," said Ron, staring at the burning pages as they blackened. "Not tonight. You get the fuck out of here." Ron kept walking towards the altar.

"You get the fuck out, I said!"

The face in front of Ron was alive with leers and grimaces: there was lunacy in it.

"I came to see the altar; I'll go when I've seen it, and not before."

"You've been talking to Coot. That it?"

"Coot?"

"What did the old wanker tell you? It's all a lie, whatever it was; he never told the truth in his frigging life, you know that? You take it from he. He used to get up there -" he threw a prayer-book at the pulpit"- and tell fucking lies!"

"I want to see the altar for myself. We'll see if he was telling lies-"

"No you won't!"

The man threw another handful of books on to the fire and stepped down to block Ron's path. He smelt not of mud but of shit. Without warning, he pounced. His hands seized Ron's neck, and the two of them toppled over. Declan's fingers reaching to gouge at Ron's eyes: his teeth snapping at his nose.

Ron was surprised at the weakness of his own arms; why hadn't he played squash the way Maggie had suggested, why were his muscles so ineffectual? If he wasn't careful this man was going to kill him.

Suddenly a light, so bright it could have been a midnight dawn, splashed through the west window. A cloud of screams followed close on it. Firelight, dwarfing the bonfire on the altar steps, dyed the air. The stained glass danced.

Declan forgot his victim for an instant, and Ron rallied. He pushed the man's chin back, and got a knee under his torso, then he kicked hard. The enemy went reeling, and Ron was up and after him, a fistful of hair securing the target while the ball of his other hand hammered at the lunatic's face 'til it broke. It wasn't enough to see the bastard's nose bleed, or to hear the cartilage mashed; Ron kept beating and beating until his fist bled. Only then did he let Declan drop.

Outside, Zeal was ablaze.

Rawhead had made fires before, many fires. But petrol was a new weapon, and he was still getting the hang of it. It didn't take him long to learn. The trick was to wound the wheeled boxes, that was easy. Open their flanks and out their blood would pour, blood that made his head ache. The boxes were easy prey, lined up on the pavement like bullocks to be slaughtered. He went amongst them demented with death, splashing their blood down the High Street and igniting it. Streams of liquid fire poured into gardens, over thresholds. Thatches

caught; wood-beamed cottages went up. In minutes Zeal was burning from end to end.

In St Peter's, Ron dragged the filthied cloth off the altar, trying to block out all thoughts of Debbie and Margaret. The police would move them to a place of safety, for certain. The issue at hand must take precedence.

Beneath the cloth was a large box, its front panel roughly carved. He took no notice of the design; there were more urgent matters to attend to. Outside, the beast was loose. He could hear its triumphant roars, and he felt eager, yes eager, to go to it. To kill it or be killed. But first, the box. It 'contained power, no doubt about that; a power that was even now raising the hairs on his head, that was working at has cock, giving him an aching hard-on. His flesh seemed to seethe with it, it elated him like love. Hungry, he put his hands on the box, and a shock that seemed to cook his joints ran up both his arms. He fell back, and for a moment he wondered if he was going to remain conscious, the pain was so bad, but it subsided, in moments. He cast around for a tool, something to get him into the box without laying flesh toil.

In desperation he wrapped his hand with a piece of the altar cloth and snatched one of the brass candleholders from the edge of the fire. The cloth began to smoulder as the heat worked its way through to his hand. He stepped back to the altar and beat at the wood like a madman until it began to splinter. His hands were numb now; if the heated candlesticks were burning his palms he couldn't feel it. What did it matter anyhow? There was a weapon here: a few inches away from him, if only he could get to it, to wield it. His erection throbbed, his balls tingled.

"Come to me," he found himself saying, “come on, come on. Come to me. Come to me." Like he was willing it into his embrace, this treasure, like it was a girl he wanted, his hard-on wanted, and he was hypnotising her into his bed.

"Come to me, come to me – "The wood facade was breaking. Panting now, he used the corners of the candlestick base to lever larger chunks of timber away. The altar was hollow, as he'd known it would be. And empty. Empty.

Except for a ball of stone, the size of a small football. Was this his prize? He couldn't believe how insignificant it looked: and yet the air was still electric around him; his blood still danced. He reached

through the hole he'd made in the altar and picked the relic up.

Outside, Rawhead was jubilating.

Images flashed before Ron's eyes as he weighed the stone in his deadened hand. A corpse with its feet burning. A flaming cot. A dog, running along the street, a living ball of fire. It was all outside, waiting to unfold. Against the perpetrator, he had this stone. He'd trusted God, just for half a day, and he got shat on. It was just a stone: just a fucking stone. He turned the football over and over in his hand, trying to make some sense of its furrows and its mounds. Was it meant to be something, perhaps; was he missing its deeper significance?

There was a knot of noise at the other end of the church; a crash, a cry, from beyond the door a whoosh of flame. Two people staggered in, followed by smoke and pleas. "He's burning the village," said a voice Ron knew. It was that benign policeman who hadn't believed in Hell; he was trying to keep his act together, perhaps for the benefit of his companion, Mrs Blatter from the hotel. The nightdress she'd run into the street wearing was torn. Her breasts were exposed; they shook with her sobs; she didn't seem to know she was naked, didn't even know where she was.

"Christ in Heaven help us," said Ivanhoe. There's no fucking Christ in here," came Declan's voice. He was standing up, and reeling towards the intruders. Ron couldn't see his face from where he stood, but he knew it must be near as damn it unrecognisable. Mrs Blatter avoided him as he staggered towards the door, and she ran towards the altar. She'd been married here: on the very spot he'd built the fire. Ron stared at her body entranced.

She was considerably overweight, her breasts sagging, her belly overshadowing her cunt so he doubted if she could even see it. But it was for this his cock-head throbbed, for this his head reeled. Her image was in his hand. God yes, she was there in his hand, she was the living equivalent of what he held. A woman. The stone was the statue of a woman, a Venus grosser than Mrs Blatter, her belly swelling with children, tits like mountains, cunt a valley that began at her navel and gaped to the world. All this time, under the cloth and the cross, they'd bowed their heads to a goddess.

Ron stepped off the altar and began to run down the aisle, pushing Mrs Blatter, the policeman and the lunatic aside.

"Don't go out," said Ivanhoe, "It's right outside."

Ron held the Venus tight, feeling her weight in his hands and taking security from her. Behind him, the Verger was screeching a warning to his Lord. Yes, it was a warning for sure.

Ron kicked open the door. On every side, fire. A flaming cot, a corpse (it was the postmaster) with its feet burning, a dog skinned by fire, hurtling past. And Rawhead, of course, silhouetted against a panorama of flames. It looked round, perhaps because it heard the warnings the Verger was yelling, but more likely, he thought, because it knew, knew without being told, that the woman had been found.

"Here!" Ron yelled, "I'm here! I'm here!"

It was coming for him now, with the steady gait of a victor closing in to claim its final and absolute victory. Doubt surged up in Ron. Why did it come so surely to meet him, not seeming to care about the weapon he carried in his hands?

Hadn't it seen, hadn't it heard the warning?

Unless Oh God in Heaven.

–Unless Coot had been wrong. Unless it was only a stone he held in his hand, a useless, meaningless lump of stone.

Then a pair of hands grabbed him around the neck.

The lunatic.

A low voice spat the word Tucker' in his ear.

Ron watched Rawhead approaching, heard the lunatic screeching now: "Here he is. Fetch him. Kill him. Here he is."

Without warning the grip slackened, and Ron half-turned to see Ivanhoe dragging the lunatic back against the Church wall. The mouth in the Verger's broken face continued to screech.

"He's here! Here! Ron looked back at Rawhead: the beast was almost on him, and he was too slow to raise the stone in self-defence. But Rawhead had no intention of taking him. It was Declan he was smelling and hearing. Ivanhoe released Declan as Rawhead's huge hands veered past Ron and fumbled for the lunatic. What followed was unwatchable. Ron couldn't bear to see the hands take Declan apart: but he heard the gabble of pleas become whoops of disbelieving grief. When he next looked round there was nothing recognisably

human on ground or wall – And Rawhead was coming for him now, coming to do the same or worse. The huge head craned round to fix on Ron, its maw gaping, and Ron saw how the fire had wounded Rawhead. The beast had been careless in the enthusiasm for destruction: fire had caught its face and upper torso. Its body hair was crisped, its mane was stubble, and the flesh on the left hand side of its face was black and blistered. The flames had roasted its eyeballs, they were swimming in a gum of mucus and tears. That was why it had followed Declan's voice and bypassed Ron; it could scarcely see.

But it must see now. It must.

"Here… here…" said Ron, "Here I am!" Rawhead heard. He looked without seeing, his eyes trying to focus.

"Here! I'm here!"

Rawhead growled in his chest. His burned face pained him; he wanted to be away from here, away in the cool of a birch-thicket, moon-washed.

His dimmed eyes found the stone; the homosapien was nursing it like a baby. It was difficult for Rawhead to see clearly, but he knew. It ached in his mind, that image. It pricked him, it teased him.

It was just a symbol of course, a sign of the power, not the power itself, but his mind made no such distinction. To him the stone was the thing he feared most: the bleeding woman, her gaping hole eating seed and spitting children. It was life, that hole, that woman, it was endless fecundity. It terrified him.

Rawhead stepped back, his own shit running freely down his leg. The fear on his face gave Ron strength. He pressed home his advantage, closing in after the retreating beast, dimly aware that Ivanhoe was rallying allies around him, armed figures waiting at the corners of his vision, eager to bring the fire-raiser down.

His own strength was failing him. The stone, lifted high above his head so Rawhead could see it plainly, seemed heavier by the moment.

"Go on," he said quietly to the gathering Zealots. "Go on, take him. Take him…"

They began to close in, even before he finished speaking.

Rawhead smelt them more than saw them: his hurting eyes were

fixed on the woman.

His teeth slid from their sheaths in preparation for the attack. The stench of humanity closed in around him from every direction.

Panic overcame his superstitions for one moment and he snatched down towards Ron, steeling himself against the stone. The attack took Ron by surprise. The claws sank in his scalp, blood poured down over his face.

Then the crowd closed in. Human hands, weak, white human hands were laid on Rawhead's body. Fists beat on his spine, nails raked his skin.

He let Ron go as somebody took a knife to the backs of his legs and hamstrung him. The agony made him howl the sky down, or so it seemed. In Rawhead's roasted eyes the stars reeled as he fell backwards on to the road, his back cracking under him. They took the advantage immediately, overpowering him by sheer weight of numbers. He snapped off a finger here, a face there, but they would not be stopped now. Their hatred was old; in their bones, did they but know it.

He thrashed under their assaults for as long as he could, but he knew death was certain. There would be no resurrection this time, no waiting in the earth for an age until their descendants forgot him. He'd be snuffed out absolutely, and there would be nothingness.

He became quieter at the thought, and looked up as best he could to where the little father was standing. Their eyes met, as they had on the road when he'd taken the boy. But now Rawhead's look had lost its power to transfix. His face was empty and sterile as the moon, defeated long before Ron slammed the stone down between his eyes. The skull was soft: it buckled inwards and a slop of brain splattered the road.

The King went out. It was suddenly over, without ceremony or celebration. Out, once and for all. There was no cry.

Ron left the stone where it lay, half buried in the face of the beast. He stood up groggily, and felt his head. His scalp was loose, his fingertips touched his skull, blood came and came. But there were arms to support him, and nothing to fear if he slept. It went unnoticed, but in death Rawhead's bladder was emptying. A stream of urine pulsed from the corpse and ran down the road. The rivulet steamed in the chilling air, its scummy nose sniffing left and right as it

looked for a place to drain. After a few feet it found the gutter and ran along it awhile to a crack in the tarmac; there it drained off into the welcoming earth.

XIV: CONFESSION OF A (PORNOGRAPHER'S) SHROUD

He had been flesh once. Flesh, and bone, and ambition. But that was an age ago, or so it seemed, and the memory of that blessed state was fading fast.

Some traces of his former life remained; time and exhaustion couldn't take everything from him. He could picture clearly and painfully the faces of those he'd loved and hated. They stared through at him from the past, clear and luminous. He could still see the sweet, goodnight expressions in his children's eyes. And the same look, less sweet but no less goodnight, in the eyes of the brutes he had murdered.

Some of those memories made him want to cry, except that there were no tears to be wrong out of his starched eyes. Besides, it was far too late for regret. Regret was a luxury reserved for the living, who still had the time, the breath and the energy to act.

He was beyond all that. He, his mother's little Ronnie (oh, if she could see him now), he was almost three weeks dead. Too late for regrets by a long chalk.

He'd done all he could do to correct the errors he'd made. He'd spun out his span to its limits and beyond, stealing himself precious time to sew up the loose ends of his frayed existence. Mother's little Ronnie had always been tidy: a paragon of neatness. That was one of the reasons he'd enjoyed accountancy. The pursuit of a few misplaced pence through hundreds of figures was a game he relished; and how satisfying, at the end of the day, to balance the books. Unfortunately life was not so perfectible, as now, too late in the day, he realized. Still, he'd done his best, and that, as Mother used to say, was all anybody could hope to do. There was nothing left but to confess, and having confessed, go to his Judgement empty-handed and contrite. As he sat, draped over the use-shined seat in the Confessional Box of St Mary Magdalene's, he fretted that the shape of his usurped body would not hold out long enough for him to unburden himself of all the sins that languished in his linen heart. He concentrated, trying to keep body and soul together for these last, vital few minutes. Soon Father Rooney would come. He would sit behind the lattice-divide of the Confessional and offer words of consolation, of understanding, of forgiveness; then, in the remaining minutes of his stolen existence,

Ronnie Glass would tell his story.

He would begin by denying that most terrible stain on his character: the accusation of pornographer.

Pornographer.

The thought was absurd. There wasn't a pornographer's bone in his body. Anyone who had known him in his thirty-two years would have testified to that. My Christ, he didn't even like sex very much. That was the irony. Of all the people to be accused of peddling filth, he was about the most unlikely. When it had seemed everyone about him was parading their adulteries like third legs, he had lived a blameless existence. The forbidden life of the body happened, like car accidents, to other people; not to him. Sex was simply a roller-coaster ride that one might indulge in once every year or so. Twice might be tolerable; three times nauseating. Was it any surprise then, that in nine years of marriage to a good Catholic girl this good Catholic boy only fathered two children?

But he'd been a loving man in his lustless way, and his wife Bernadette had shared his indifference to sex, so his unenthusiastic member had never been a bone of contention between them. And the children were a joy. Samantha was already growing into a model of politeness and tidiness, and Imogen (though scarcely two) had her mother's smile.

Life had been fine, all in all. He had almost owned a featureless semi-detached house in the leafier suburbs of South London. He had possessed a small garden, Sunday-tended: a soul the same. It had been, as far as he could judge, a model life, unassuming and din-free.

And it would have remained so, had it not been for that worm of greed in his nature. Greed had undone him, no doubt.

If he hadn't been greedy, he wouldn't have looked twice at the job that Maguire had offered him. He would have trusted his instinct, taken one look around the pokey smoke-filled office above the Hungarian pastry-shop in Soho, and turned tail. But his itch for wealth diverted him from the plain truth – that he was using all his skills as an accountant to give a gloss of credibility to an operation that stank of corruption. He'd known that in his heart, of course. Known that despite Maguire's ceaseless talk of Moral Rearmament, his fondness for his children, his obsession with the gentlemanly art of Bonsai, the man was a louse. The lowest of the low. But he'd successfully shut out that

knowledge, and contented himself with the job in hand: balancing the books. Maguire was generous: and that made the blindness easier to induce. He even began to like the man and his associates. He'd got used to seeing the shambling bulk that was Dennis "Dork' Luzzati, a fresh cream pastry perpetually hovering at his fat lips; got used, too, to little three-fingered Henry B. Henry, with his card tricks and his patter, a new routine every day. They weren't the most sophisticated of conversationalists, and they certainly wouldn't have been welcome at the Tennis Club, but they seemed harmless enough.

It was a shock then, a terrible shock, when he eventually drew back the veil and saw Dork, Henry and Maguire for the beasts they really were.

The revelation had occurred by accident.

One night, finishing some tax-work late, Ronnie had caught a cab down to the warehouse, planning to deliver his report to Maguire by hand. He'd never actually visited the warehouse, though he'd heard it mentioned between them often enough. Maguire had been stock-piling his supplies of books there for some months. Mostly cookery books, from Europe, or so Ronnie had been told. That night, that last night of cleanliness, he walked into the truth, in all its full-colour glory.

Maguire was there, in one of the plain-brick rooms, sitting on a chair surrounded by packages and boxes. An unshaded bulb threw a halo on to his thinning scalp; it glistened, pinkly. Dork was there too, engrossed in a cake. Henry B. was playing Patience. Piled high on every side of the trio there were magazines, thousands upon thousands of them, their covers shining, virginal, and somehow fleshy.

Maguire looked up from his calculations.

"Glassy," he said. He always used that nickname.

Ronnie stared into the room, guessing, even from a distance, what these heaped treasures were.

"Come on in," said Henry B. "Good for a game?"

"Don't look so serious," soothed Maguire, “this is just merchandise."

A kind of numb horror drew Ronnie to approach one of the stacks of magazines, and open the top copy. Climax Erotica, the cover read, Full Colour Pornography for the Discriminating Adult. Text in English, German and French. Unable to prevent himself he began to look

through the magazine, his face stinging with embarrassment, only half-hearing the barrage of jokes and threats that Maguire was shooting off.

Swarms of obscene images flew out of the pages, horribly abundant. He'd never seen anything like it in his life. Every sexual act possible between consenting adults (and a few only doped acrobats would consent to) were chronicled in glorious detail. The performers of these unspeakable acts smiled, glassy-eyed, at Ronnie as they swarmed up out of a grease of sex, neither shame nor apology on their lust-puffed faces. Every slit, every slot, every pucker and pimple of their bodies was exposed, naked beyond nakedness. The pouting, panting excess of it turned Ronnie's stomach to ash.

He closed the magazine and glanced at another pile beside it. Different faces, same furious coupling. Every depravity was catered for somewhere. The titles alone testified to the delights to be found inside. Bizarre Women in Chains, one read. Enslaved by Rubber, another promised. Labrador Lover, a third portrayed, in perfect focus down to the last wet whisker.

Slowly Michael Maguire's cigarette-worn voice filtered through into Ronnie's reeling brain. It cajoled, or tried to; and worse it mocked him, in its subtle way, for his naivetй.

"You had to find out sooner or later," he said. "I suppose it may as well be sooner, eh? No harm in it. All a bit of fun."

Ronnie shook his head violently, trying to dislodge the images that had taken root behind his eyes. They were multiplying already, invading a territory that had been so innocent of such possibilities. In his imagination, Labradors scampered around in leather, drinking from the bodies of bound whores. It was frightening the way these pictures flowed out into his eyes, each page a new abomination. He felt he'd choke on them unless he acted.

"Horrible," was all he could say. "Horrible. Horrible. Horrible."

He kicked a pile of Bizarre Women in Chains, and they toppled over, the repeated images of the cover sprawling across the dirty floor.

"Don't do that," said Maguire, very quietly.

"Horrible," said Ronnie. They're all horrible."

"There's a big market for them."'Not me!" he said, as though Maguire

was suggesting he had some personal interest in them.

"All right, so you don't like them. He doesn't like them, Dork."

Dork was wiping cream off his short fingers with a dainty handkerchief.

"Why not?"

Too dirty for him."

"Horrible," said Ronnie again.

"Well you're in this up to your neck, my son," said Maguire. His voice was the Devil's voice, wasn't it? Surely the Devil's voice, "You may as well grin and bear it."

Dork guffawed, "Grin and bear it; I like it Mick, I like it."

Ronnie looked up at Maguire. The man was forty-five, maybe fifty; but his face had a fretted, cracked look, old before its years. The charm was gone; it was scarcely human, the face he locked eyes with. Its sweat, its bristles, its puckered mouth made it resemble, in Ronnie's mind, the proffered backside of one of the red-raw sluts in the magazines.

"We're all known villains here," the organ was saying, “and we've got nothing to lose if we're caught again."

"Nothing," said Dork.

"Whereas you, my son, you're a spit-clean professional. Way I see it, if you want to go gabbing about this dirty business, you're going to lose your reputation as a nice, honest accountant. In fact I'd venture to suggest you'll never work again. Do you take my meaning?"

Ronnie wanted to hit Maguire, so he did; hard too. There was a satisfying snap as Maguire's teeth met at speed, and blood came quickly from between his lips. It was the first time Ronnie had fought since his schooldays, and he was slow to avoid the inevitable retaliation. The blow that Maguire returned sent him sprawling, bloodied, amongst the Bizarre Women. Before he could clamber to his feet Dork had slammed his heel into Ronnie's face, grinding the gristle in his nose. While Ronnie bunked back the blood Dork hoisted him to his feet, and held him up as a captive target for Maguire. The ringed hand became a fist, and for the next five minutes Maguire used Ronnie

as a punch bag, starting below the belt and working up.

Ronnie found the pain curiously reassuring; it seemed to heal his guilty psyche better than a string of Hail Marys. When the beating was over, and Dork had let him out, defaced, into the dark, there wasn't any anger left in him, only a need to finish the cleansing Maguire had begun.

He went home to Bernadette that night and told her a lie about being mugged in the street. She was so consoling, it made him sick to be deceiving her, but he had no choice. That night, and the night after, were sleepless. He lay in his own bed, just a few feet from that of his trusting spouse, and tried to make sense of his feelings. He knew in his bones the truth would sooner or later become public knowledge. Better surely to go to the police, come clean. But that took courage, and his heart had never felt weaker. So he prevaricated through the Thursday night and the Friday, letting the bruises yellow and the confusion settle.

Then on Sunday, the shit hit the fan.

The lowest of the Sunday filth-sheets had his face on the front cover: complete with the banner headline: The Sex Empire of Ronald Glass'. Inside, were photographs, snatched from innocent circumstance and construed as guilt. Glass appearing to look pursued. Glass appearing to look devious. His natural hirsuteness made him seem ill-shaven; his neat hair-cut suggested the prison aesthetic favoured by some of the criminal fraternity. Being short-sighted he squinted; photographed squinting he looked like a lustful rat.

He stood in the newsagents, staring at his own face, and knew his personal Armageddon was on the horizon. Shaking, he read the terrible lies inside.

Somebody, he never exactly worked out who, had told the whole story. The pornography, the brothels, the sex-shops, the cinemas. The secret world of smut that Maguire had masterminded was here detailed in every sordid particular. Except that Maguire's name did not appear. Neither did Dork's, nor Henry's. It was Glass, Glass all the way: his guilt was transparent. He had been framed, neat as anything. A corrupter of children, the leader called him, Little Boy Blue grown fat and horny.

It was too late to deny anything. By the time he got back to the house Bernadette had gone, with the children in tow. Somebody had

got to her with the news, probably salivating down the phone, delighting in the sheer dirt of it.

He stood in the kitchen, where the table was laid for a breakfast the family hadn't yet eaten, and would now never eat, and he cried. Not a great deal: his supply of tears was strictly limited, but enough to feel the duty done. Then, having finished with his gesture of remorse, he sat down, like any decent man who has been deeply wronged, and planned murder.

In many ways getting the gun was more difficult than anything that followed. It required some careful thought, some soft words, and a good deal of hard cash. It took him a day and a half to locate the weapon he wanted, and to learn how to use it.

Then, in his own good time, he went about his business.

Henry B. died first. Ronnie shot him in his own stripped pinewood kitchen in up-and-coming Islington. He had a cup of freshly-brewed coffee in his three-fingered hand and a look of almost pitiable terror on his face. The first shot struck him in the side, denting his shirt, and causing a little blood to come. Far less than Ronnie had been steeling himself for however. More confident, he fired again. The second shot hit his intended in the neck: and that seemed to be the killer. Henry B. pitched forward like a comedian in a silent movie, not relinquishing the coffee cup until the moment before he hit the floor. The cup spun in the mingled dregs of coffee and life, and rattled, at last, to a halt.

Ronnie stepped over to the body and fired a third shot straight through the back of Henry B's neck. This last bullet was almost casual; swift and accurate. Then he escaped easily out of the back gate, almost elated by the ease of the act. He felt as though he'd cornered and killed a rat in his cellar; an unpleasant duty that needed to be done.

The frisson lasted five minutes. Then he was profoundly sick.

Anyway, that was Henry. All out of tricks.

Dork's death was rather more sensational. He ran out of time at the Dog Track; indeed, he was showing Ronnie his winning ticket when he felt the long-bladed knife insinuate itself between his fourth and fifth ribs. He could scarcely believe he was being murdered, the expression on his pastry-fattened face was one of complete amazement. He kept looking from side to side at the punters milling around as though at any moment one of them would point, and laugh, and tell him that

this was all a joke, a premature birthday game.

Then Ronnie twisted the blade in the wound (he'd read that this was surely lethal) and Dork realised that, winning ticket or not, this wasn't his lucky day.

His heavy body was carried along in the crush of the crowd for a good ten yards until it became wedged in the teeth of the turnstile. Only then did someone feel the hot gush from Dork, and scream.

By then Ronnie was well away.

Content, feeling cleaner by the hour, he went back to the house. Bernadette had been in, collecting clothes and favourite ornaments. He wanted to say to her: take everything, it means nothing to me, but she'd slipped in and gone again, like a ghost of a housewife. In the kitchen the table was still set for that final Sunday breakfast. There was dust on the cornflakes in the children's bowls; the rancid butter was beginning to grease the air. Ronnie sat through the late afternoon, through the dusk, through until the early hours of the following morning, and tasted his new found power over life and death. Then he went to bed in his clothes, no longer caring to be tidy, and slept the sleep of the almost good.

It wasn't so hard for Maguire to guess who'd wasted Dork and Henry B. Henry, though the idea of that particular worm turning was hard to swallow. Many of the criminal community had known Ronald Glass, had laughed with Maguire over the little deception that was being played upon the innocent. But no-one had believed him capable of such extreme sanctions against his enemies. In some seedier quarters he was now being saluted for his sheer bloody-mindedness; others, Maguire included, felt he had gone too far to be welcomed into the fold like a strayed sheep. The general opinion was that he be dispatched, before he did any more damage to the fragile balance of power.

So Ronnie's days became numbered. They could have been counted on the three fingers of Henry B's hand.

They came for him on the Saturday afternoon and took him quickly, without him having time to wield a weapon in his defence. They escorted him to a Salami and Cooked Meats warehouse, and in the icy white safety of the cold storage room they hung him from a hook and tortured him. Anyone with any claim to Dork's or Henry B's affections was given an opportunity to work out their grief on him. With knives,

with hammers, with oxyacetylene torches. They shattered his knees and his elbows. They put out his eardrums, burned the flesh off the soles of his feet.

Finally, about eleven or so, they began to lose interest. The clubs were just getting into their rhythm, the gaming tables were beginning to simmer, it was time to be done with justice and get out on the town.

That was when Micky Maguire arrived, dressed to kill in his best bib and tucker. Ronnie knew he was there somewhere in the haze, but his senses were all but out, and he only half-saw the gun leveled at his head, half felt the noise of the blast bounce around the white-tiled room.

A single bullet, immaculately placed, entered his brain through the middle of his forehead. As neat as even he could have wished, like a third eye.

His body twitched on its hook a moment, and died.

Maguire took his applause like a man, kissed the ladies, thanked his dear friends who had seen this deed done with him, and went to play. The body was dumped in a black plastic bag on the edge of Epping Forest, early on Sunday morning, just as the dawn chorus was tuning up in the ash trees and the sycamores. And that, to all intents and purposes, was the end of that. Except that it was the beginning.

Ronnie's body was found by a jogger, out before seven on the following Monday. In the day between his being dumped and being found his corpse had already begun to deteriorate.

But the pathologist had seen far, far worse. He watched dispassionately while the two mortuary technicians stripped the body, folded the clothes and placed them in tagged plastic bags. He waited patiently and attentively while the wife of the deceased was ushered into his echoing domain, her face ashen, her eyes swelled to bursting with too many tears. She looked down at her husband without love, staring at the wounds and at the marks of torture quite unflinchingly. The pathologist had a whole story written behind this last confrontation between Sex-King and untroubled wife. Their loveless marriage, their arguments over his despicable way of life, her despair, his brutality, and now, her relief that the torment was finally over and she was released to start a new life without him. The pathologist made a mental note to look up the pretty widow's address. She was delicious

in her indifference to mutilation; it made his mouth wet to think of her.

Ronnie knew Bernadette had come and gone; he could sense too the other faces that popped into the mortuary just to peer down at the Sex-King. He was an object of fascination, even in death, and it was a horror he hadn't predicted, buzzing around in the cool coils of his brain, like a tenant who refuses to be ousted by the bailiffs, still seeing the world hovering around him, and not being able to act upon it.

In the days since his death there had been no hint of escape from this condition. He had sat here, in his own dead skull, unable to find a way out into the living world, and unwilling, somehow, to relinquish life entirely and leave himself to Heaven. There was still a will to revenge in him. A part of his mind, unforgiving of trespasses, was prepared to postpone Paradise in order to finish the job he had started. The books needed balancing; and until Michael Maguire was dead Ronnie could not go to his atonement.

In his round bone prison he watched the curious come and go, and knotted up his will.

The pathologist did his work on Ronnie's corpse with all the respect of an efficient fish-gutter, carelessly digging the bullet out of his cranium, and nosing around in the stews of smashed bone and cartilage that had formerly been his knees and elbows. Ronnie didn't like the man. He'd leered at Bernadette in a highly unprofessional way; and now, when he was playing the professional, his callousness was positively shameful. Oh for a voice; for a fist, for a body to use for a time. Then he'd show this meat-merchant how bodies should be treated. The will was not enough though: it needed a focus, and a means of escape.

The pathologist finished his report and his rough sewing, flung his juice-shiny gloves and his stained instruments on to the trolley beside the swabs and the alcohol, and left the body to the assistants.

Ronnie heard the swing-doors close behind him as the man departed. Water was running somewhere, splashing into the sink; the sound irritated him.

Standing beside the table on which he lay, the two technicians discussed their shoes. Of all things, shoes. The banality of it, thought Ronnie, the life-decaying banality of it.

"You know them new heels, Lenny? The ones I got to put on my

brown suedes? Useless. No bleeding good at all."

"I'm not surprised."

"And the price I paid for them. Look at that; just look at that. Worn through in a month."

Paper-thin."

"They are, Lenny, they're paper-thin. I'm going to take them back."'I would."

"lam."

"I would."

This mindless conversation, after those hours of torture, of sudden death, of the post-mortem that he'd so recently endured, was almost beyond endurance. Ronnie's spirit began to buzz round and round in his brain like an angry bee trapped in an upturned jam-jar, determined to get out and start stinging Round and round; like the conversation.

"Paper-bloody-thin."

"I'm not surprised."

"Bloody foreign. These soles. Made in fucking Korea."

"Korea?"

"That's why they're paper-thin."

It was unforgivable: the trudging stupidity of these people. That they should live and act and be: while he buzzed on and on, boiling with frustration. Was that fair?

"Neat-shot, eh Lenny?"

"What?"

"The stiff. Old what's his name the Sex-King. Bang in the middle of the forehead. See that? Pop goes the weasel."

Lenny's companion, it seemed, was still preoccupied with his paper-thin sole. He didn't reply. Lenny inquisitively inched back the shroud from Ronnie's forehead. The lines of sawn and scalped flesh were

inelegantly sewn, but the bullet hole itself was neat.

"Look at it."

The other glanced round at the dead face. The head-wound had been cleaned after the probing pincers had worked at it. The edges were white and puckered.

"I thought they usually went for the heart," said the sole-searcher.

"This wasn't any street-fight. It was an execution; formal like," said Lenny, poking his little finger into the wound. "It's a perfect shot. Bang in the middle of the forehead. Like he had three eyes." ·Yeah…"

The shroud was tossed back over Ronnie's face. The bee buzzed on; round and round. "You hear about third eyes, don't you?"

"Do you?"'Stella read me something about it being the centre of the body."

That's your navel. How can your forehead be the centre of your body?"

"Well…"

That's your navel."

"No, it's more your spiritual centre."

The other didn't deign to respond.

"Just about where this bullet-hole is," said Lenny, still lost in admiration for Ronnie's killer.

The bee listened. The bullet-hole was just one of many holes in his Life. Holes where his wife and children should have been. Holes winking up at him like sightless eyes from the pages of the magazines, pink and brown and hair-lipped. Holes to the right of him, holes to the left Could it be, at last, that he had found here a hole that he could profit by? Why not leave by the wound?

His spirit braced itself, and made for his brow, creeping through his cortex with a mixture of trepidation and excitement. Ahead, he could sense the exit door like the light at the end of a long tunnel. Beyond the hole, the warp and weft of his shroud glittered like a promised land. His sense of direction was good; the light grew as he crept, the voices became louder. Without fanfare Ronnie's spirit spat itself into

the -outside world: a tiny seepage of soul. The motes of fluid that carried his will and his consciousness were soaked up by his shroud like tears by tissues.

His flesh and blood body was utterly deserted now; an icy bulk fit for nothing but the flames.

Ronnie Glass existed in a new world: a white linen world like no state he had lived or dreamed before.

Ronnie Glass was his shroud.

Had Ronnie's pathologist not been forgetful he wouldn't have come back into the mortuary at that moment, trying to locate the diary he'd written the Widow Glass' number in; and, had he not come in, he would have lived. As it was "Haven't you started on this one yet?" he snapped at the technicians.

They murmured some apology or other. He was always testy at this time of night; they were used to his tantrums.

"Get on with it," he said, stripping the shroud off the body and flinging it to the floor in irritation, “before the fucker walks out of here in disgust. Don't want to get our little hotel a bad reputation, do we?" "Yes, sir. I mean, no sir."

"Well don't stand there: parcel it up. There's a widow wants him dispatched as soon as possible. I've seen all I need to see of him."

Ronnie lay on the floor in a crumpled heap, slowly spreading his influence through this new-found land. It felt good to have a body, even if it was sterile and rectangular. Bringing a power of will to bear he hadn't known he possessed, Ronnie took full control of the shroud.

At first it refused life. It had always been passive: that was its condition. It wasn't use to occupation by spirits. But Ronnie wasn't to be beaten now. His will was an imperative. Against all rules of natural behaviour it stretched and knotted the sullen linen into a semblance of life.

The shroud rose.

The pathologist had located his little black book, and was in the act of pocketing it when this white curtain spread itself in his path, stretching like a man who has just woken from a deep sleep.

Ronnie tried to speak; but the only voice he could find was a whisper of the cloth on the air, too light, too insubstantial to be heard over the complaints of frightened men. And frightened they were. Despite the pathologist's call for assistance, none was forthcoming. Lenny and his companion were sliding away towards the swing-doors, gaping mouths babbling entreaties to any local god who would listen.

The pathologist backed off against the post-mortem table, quite out of gods.

"Get out of my sight," he said.

Ronnie embraced him, tightly.

"Help," said the pathologist, almost to himself. But help was gone. It was running down the corridors, still babbling, keeping its back to the miracle that was taking place in the mortuary. The pathologist was alone, wrapped up in this starched embrace, murmuring, at the last, some apologies he had found beneath his pride.

"I'm sorry, whoever you are. Whatever you are. I'm sorry."

But there was an anger in Ronnie that would not have any truck with late converts; no pardons or reprieves were available. This fish-eyed bastard, this son of the scalpel had cut and examined his old body as though it was a side of beef. It made Ronnie livid to think of this creep's oh-so-cool appraisal of life, death and Bernadette. The bastard would die, here, amongst his remains, and let that be an end to his callous profession.

The corners of the shroud were forming into crude arms now, as Ronnie's memory shaped them. It seemed natural to recreate his old appearance in this new medium. He made hands first: then digits: even a rudimentary thumb. He was like a morbid Adam raised out of linen.

Even as they formed, the hands had the pathologist about the neck. As yet they had no sense of touch in them, and it was difficult to judge how hard to press on the throbbing skin, so he simply used all the strength he could muster. The man's face blackened, and his tongue, the colour of a plum, stuck out from his mouth like a spear-head, sharp and hard. In his enthusiasm, Ronnie broke his neck. It snapped suddenly, and the head fell backwards at a horrid angle. The vain apologies had long since stopped.

Ronnie dropped him to the polished floor, and stared down at the

hands he had made, with eyes that were still two pin-pricks in a sheet of stained cloth.

He felt certain of himself in this body, and God, he was strong; he'd broken the bastard's neck without exerting himself at all. Occupying this strange, bloodless physique he had a new freedom from the constraints of humanity. He was alive suddenly to the life of the air, feeling it now fill and billow him. Surely he could fly, like a sheet in the wind, or if it suited him knot himself into a fist and beat the world into submission. The prospects seemed endless.

And yet… he sensed that this possession was at best temporary. Sooner or later the shroud would want to resume its former life as an idle piece of cloth, and its true, passive nature would be restored. This body had not been given to him, merely loaned; it was up to him to use it to the best of his vengeful abilities. He knew the priorities. First and foremost to find Michael Maguire and dispatch him. Then, if he still had the time left, he would see the children. But it wasn't wise to go visiting as a flying shroud. Better by far to work at this illusion of humanity, and see if he could sophisticate the effect.

He'd seen what freak creases could do, making faces appear in a crumpled pillow, or in the folds of a jacket hanging on the back of the door. More extraordinary still, there was the Shroud of Turin, in which the face and body of Jesus Christ had been miraculously imprinted. Bernadette had been sent a postcard of the Shroud, with every wound of lance and nail in place. Why couldn't he make the same miracle, by force of will? Wasn't he resurrected too?

He went to the sink in the morgue and turned off the running tap, then stared into the mirror to watch his will take shape. The surface of the shroud was already twitching and scurrying as he demanded new forms of it. At first there was only the primitive outline of his head, roughly shaped, like that of a snowman. Two pits for eyes: a lumpen nose. But he concentrated, willing the linen to stretch itself to the limits of its elasticity. And behold! It worked, it really worked! The threads complained, but acquiesced to his demands, forming in exquisite reproduction the nostrils, and then the eyelids; the upper Up: now the lower. He traced from memory the contours of his lost face like an adoring lover, and remade them in every detail. Now he began to make a column for the neck, filled with air, but looking deceptively solid. Below that the shroud swelled into a manly torso. The arms were already formed; the legs followed quickly on. And it was done.

He was re-made, in his own image.

The illusion was not perfect. For one thing, he was pure white, except for the stains, and his flesh had the texture of cloth. The creases of his face were perhaps too severe, almost cubist in appearance, and it was impossible to coax the cloth to make a semblance of either hair or nails. But he was as ready for the world as any living shroud could hope to be.

It was time to go out and meet his public.

"Your game, Micky."

Maguire seldom lost at poker. He was too clever, and that used face too unreadable; his tired, bloodshot eyes never let anything out. Yet, despite his formidable reputation as a winner, he never cheated. That was his bond with himself. There was no lift in winning if there was a cheat involved. It was just stealing then; and that was for the criminal classes. He was a businessman, pure and simple.

Tonight, in the space of two and a half hours, he'd pocketed a tidy sum. Life was good. Since the deaths of Dork, Henry B. Henry and Glass, the police had been too concerned with Murder to take much notice of the lower orders of Vice. Besides, their palms were well crossed with silver; they had nothing to complain about. Inspector Wall, a drinking companion of many years' standing, had even offered Maguire protection from the lunatic killer who was apparently on the loose. The irony of the idea pleased Maguire mightily.

It was almost three am. Time for bad girls and boys to be in their beds, dreaming of crimes for the morrow. Maguire rose from the table, signifying the end of the night's gambling. He buttoned up his waistcoat and carefully reknotted his lemon water-ice silk tie.

"Another game next week?" he suggested.

The defeated players agreed. They were used to losing money to their boss, but there were no hard feelings amongst the quartet. There was a tinge of sadness perhaps: they missed Henry B. and Dork. Saturday nights had been such joyous affairs. Now there was a muted tone over the proceedings.

Perlgut was the first to leave, stubbing out his cheroot in the brimming ashtray.

"Night, Mick."

"Night, Frank. Give the kids a kiss from their Uncle Mick, eh?"

"Will do."

Perlgut shuffled off, with his stuttering brother in tow.

"G-g-g-goodnight."

"Night, Ernest."

The brothers clattered down the stairs.

Norton was the last to go, as always.

"Shipment tomorrow?" he asked.

Tomorrow's Sunday," said Maguire. He never worked on Sundays; it was a day for the family.

"Not, today's Sunday," said Norton, not trying to be pedantic, just letting it come naturally. Tomorrow's Monday."

"Yes."

"Shipment Monday?"

"I hope so."

"You going to the warehouse?"

"Probably."

"I'll pick you up then: we can run down together."

"Fine." Norton was a good man. Humourless, but reliable.

"Night then."

"Night."

His three-inch heels were steel-tipped; they sounded like a woman's stilettos on the stairs. The door slammed below.

Maguire counted his profits, drained his glass of Cointreau, and switched out the light in the gaming room. The smoke was already staling. Tomorrow he'd have to get somebody to come up and open the window, let some fresh Soho smells in there. Salami and coffee beans, commerce and sleaze. He loved it, loved it with a passion, like a babe loves a tit.

As he descended the stairs into the darkened sex shop he heard the exchange of farewells in the street outside, followed by the slamming of car doors and the purring departure of expensive cars. A good night with good friends, what more could any man reasonably ask?

At the bottom of the stairs he stopped for a moment. The blinking street-sign lights opposite illuminated the shop sufficiently for him to make out the rows of magazines. Their plastic-bound faces glinted; siliconed breasts and spanked buttocks swelled from the covers like over-ripe fruit. Faces dripping mascara pouted at him, offering every lonely satisfaction paper could promise. But he was unmoved; the time had long since passed when he found any of that stuff of interest. It was simply currency to him; he was neither disgusted nor aroused by it. He was a happily married man after all, with a wife whose imagination barely stretched beyond page two of the Kama Sutra, and whose children were slapped soundly if they spoke one questionable word.

In the corner of the shop, where the Bondage and Domination material was displayed, something rose from the floor. Maguire found it hard to focus in the intermittent light. Red, blue. Red, blue. But it wasn't Norton, nor one of the Perlguts.

It was a face he knew however, smiling at him against the background of "Roped and Raped' magazines. Now he saw: it was Glass, clear as day, and, despite the coloured lights, white as a sheet.

He didn't try to reason how a dead man could be staring at him, he just dropped his coat and his jaw, and ran.

The door was locked, and the key was one of two dozen on his ring. Oh Jesus, why did he have so many keys? Keys to the warehouse, keys to the greenhouse, keys to the whorehouse. And only that twitching light to see them by. Red, blue. Red, blue.

He rummaged amongst the keys and by some magical chance the first he tried slotted easily in the lock and turned like a finger in hot grease. The door was open, the street ahead.

But Glass glided up behind him soundlessly, and before he could step over the threshold he had thrown something around Maguire's face, a cloth of some kind. It smelt of hospitals, of ether or disinfectant or both. Magure tried to cry out but a fist of cloth was being thrust down his throat. He gagged on it, the vomit-reflex making his system revolt. In response the assassin just tightened his grip.

In the street opposite a girl Maguire knew only as Natalie (Model: seeks interesting position with strict disciplinarian) was watching the struggle in the doorway of the shop with a doped look on her vapid face. She'd seen murder once or twice; she'd seen rape aplenty, and she wasn't about to get involved. Besides, it was late, and the insides of her thighs ached. Casually she turned away down the pink-lit corridor, leaving the violence to take its course. Maguire made a mental note to have the girl's face carved up one of these days. If he survived; which seemed less likely by the moment. The red, blue, red, blue was unfixable now, as his airless brain went colour-blind, and though he seemed to-snatch a grip on his would-be assassin, the hold seemed to evaporate, leaving cloth, empty cloth, running through his sweating hands like silk.

Then someone spoke. Not behind him, not the voice of his assassin, but in front. In the street. Norton. It was Norton. He'd returned for some reason, God love him, and he was getting out of his car ten yards down the street, shouting Maguire's name.

The assassin's choke-hold faltered and gravity claimed Maguire. He fell heavily, the world spinning, to the pavement, his face purple in the lurid light.

Norton ran towards his boss, fumbling for his gun amongst the bric-a-brac in his pocket. The white-suited assassin was already backing off down the street, unprepared to take on another man. He looked, thought Norton, for all the world like a failed member of the Ku Klux Klan; a hood, a robe, a cloak. Norton dropped to one knee, took a double-handed aim at the man and fired. The result was startling. The figure seemed to balloon up, his body losing its shape, becoming a flapping mass of white cloth, with a face loosely imprinted on it. There was a noise like the snapping of Monday-washed sheets on a line, a sound that was out of place in this grimy back-street. Norton's confusion left him responseless for a moment, and the man-sheet seemed to rise in the air, illusory.

At Norton's feet, Maguire was coming round, groaning. He was trying to speak but having difficulty making himself understood through his bruised larynx and throat. Norton bent closer to him. He smelt of vomit and fear.

"Glass," he seemed to be saying.

It was enough. Norton nodded, said hush. That was the face, of course, on the sheet. Glass, the imprudent accountant. He'd watched

the man's feet fried, watched the whole vicious ritual; not to his taste at all.

Well, well: Ronnie Glass had some friends apparently, friends not above revenge.

Norton looked up, but the wind had lifted the ghost above the rooftops and away.

That had been a bad experience; the first taste of failure. Ronnie remembered it still, the desolation of that night. He'd lain, heaped in a rat-run corner of a derelict factory south of the river, and calmed the panic in his fibers. What good was this trick he'd mastered if he lost control of it the instant he was threatened? He must plan more carefully, and wind his will up until it would brook no resistance. Already he sensed that his energy was ebbing: and there was a hint of difficulty in restructuring his body this second time round. He had no time to waste with fumbled failures. He must corner the man where he could not possibly escape.

Police investigations at the mortuary had led round in circles for half a day; and now into the night. Inspector Wall of the Yard had tried every technique he knew. Soft words, hard words, promises, threats, seductions, surprises, even blows. Still Lenny told the same story; a ridiculous story he swore would be corroborated when his fellow technician came out of the catatonic state he'd now taken refuge in. But there was no way the Inspector could take the story seriously. A shroud that walked? How could he put that in his report? No, he wanted something concrete, even if it was a lie.

"Can I have a cigarette?" asked Lenny for the umpteenth time. Wall shook his head.

"Hey, Fresco -" Wall addressed his right-hand man, Al Kincaid. "I think it's time you searched the lad again."

Lenny knew what another search implied; it was a euphemism for a beating. Up against the wall, legs spread, hands on head: wham! His stomach jumped at the thought.

"Listen…" he implored.

"What, Lenny?"

"I didn't do it."

"Of course you did it," said Wall, picking his nose. "We just want to know why. Didn't you like the old fucker? Make dirty remarks about your lady-friends, did he? He had a bit of a reputation for that, I understand."

Al Fresco smirked.

"Was that why you nobbled him?"

"For God's sake," said Lenny, "you think I'd tell you a fucking story like that if I didn't see it with my own fucking eyes."

"Language," chided Fresco.

"Shrouds don't fly," said Wall, with understandable conviction.

"Then where is the shroud, eh?" reasoned Lenny.

"You incinerated it, you ate it, how the fuck should I know?"

"Language," said Lenny quietly.

The phone rang before Fresco could hit him. He picked it up, spoke and handed it to Wall. Then he hit Lenny, a friendly slap that drew a little blood.

"Listen," said Fresco, breathing with lethal proximity to Lenny as if to suck the air out of his mouth, "We know you did it, see? You were the only one in the morgue alive to do it, see? We just want to know why. That's all. Just why."

"Fresco." Wall had covered the receiver as he spoke to the muscle-man.

"Yes, sir."

"It's Mr. Maguire."

"Mr. Maguire?"

"Micky Maguire."

Fresco nodded.

"He's very upset." "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"He thinks he's been attacked, by the man in the morgue. The

pornographer."

"Glass," said Lenny, "Ronnie Glass."

"Ronald Glass, like the man says," said Wall, grinning at Lenny.

"That's ridiculous," said Fresco.

"Well I think we ought to do our duty to an upstanding member of the community, don't you? Duck in to the morgue will you, make sure -"

"Make sure?"

That the bastard's still down there -"

"Oh."

Fresco exited, confused but obedient.

Lenny didn't understand any of this: but he was past caring. What the hell was it to him anyway? He started to play with his balls through a hole in his left-hand pocket. Wall watched him with disdain.

"Don't do that," he said. "You can play with yourself as much as you like once we've got you tucked up in a nice, warm cell."

Lenny shook his head slowly, and removed his hand from his pocket. Just wasn't his day.

Fresco was already back from down the hall, a little breathless.

"He's there," he said, visibly brightened by the simplicity of the task.

"Of course he is," said Wall.

"Dead as a Dodo," said Fresco.

"What's a Dodo?" asked Lenny.

Fresco looked blank.

Turn of phrase," he said testily.

Wall of the Yard was back on the line, talking to Maguire. The man at the other end sounded well spooked; and his reassurances seemed

to do little good.

"He's all present and correct, Micky. You must have been mistaken."

Maguire's fear ran back through the phone line like a mild electric charge.

"I saw him, damn you."

"Well, he's lying down there with a hole in the middle of his head, Micky. So tell me how can you have seen him?"

"I don't know," said Maguire. "Well then."

"Listen… if you get the chance, drop by will you? Same arrangement as usual. I could put some nice work your way."

Wall didn't like talking business on the phone, it made him uneasy.

"Later, Micky."

"OK. Call by?"

"I will."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

Wall put down the receiver and stared at the suspect. Lenny was back to pocket billiards again. Crass little animal; another search was clearly called for.

"Fresco," said Wall in dove-like tones, “will you please teach Lenny not to play with himself in front of police officers?"

In his fortress in Richmond, Maguire cried like a baby.

He'd seen Glass, no doubt of it. Whatever Wall believed about the body being at the mortuary, he knew otherwise. Glass was out, on the street, foot-loose and fancy-free, despite the fact that he'd blown a hole in the bastard's head.

Maguire was a God-fearing man, and he believed in life after death, though until now he'd never questioned how it would come about. This was the answer, this blank-faced son of a whore stinking of ether: this was the way the afterlife would be. It made him weep, fearing to

live, and fearing to die.

It was well past dawn now; a peaceful Sunday morning. Nothing would happen to him in the safety of the "Ponderosa', and in full daylight. This was his castle, built with his hard-won thievings. Norton was here, armed to the teeth. There were dogs at every gate. No-one, living or dead, would dare challenge his supremacy in this territory. Here, amongst the portraits of his heroes: Louis B. Mayer, Dillinger, Churchill; amongst his family; amidst his good taste, his money, his objets d'an, here he was his own man. If the mad accountant came for him he'd be blasted in his tracks, ghost or no ghost. Finis.

After all, wasn't he Michael Roscoe Maguire, an empire builder? Born with nothing, he'd risen by virtue of his stockbroker's face and his maverick's heart. Once in a while, maybe, and only under very controlled conditions, he might let his darker appetites show; as at the execution of Glass. He'd taken genuine pleasure in that little scenario; his the coup de grace, his the infinite compassion of the killing stroke. But his life of violence was all but behind him now. Now he was a bourgeois, secure in his fortress.

Raquel woke at eight, and busied herself with preparing breakfast.

"You want anything to eat?" she asked Maguire.

He shook his head. His throat hurt too much.

"Coffee?"

"Yes."

"You want it in here?"

He nodded. He liked sitting in front of the window that overlooked the lawn and the greenhouse. The day was brightening; fat, fleecy clouds bucked the wind, their shadows passing over the perfect green. Maybe he'd take up painting, he thought, like Winston. Commit his favourite landscapes to canvas; maybe a view of the garden, even a nude of Raquel, immortalised in oils before her tits sagged beyond all hope of support.

She was back purring at his side, with the coffee.

"You, OK?" she asked.

Dumb bitch. Of course he wasn't OK.

"Sure," he said.

"You've got a visitor."

"What?" He sat up straight in the leather chair. "Who?"

She was smiling at him.

"Tracy," she said. "She wants to come in and cuddle."

He expelled a hiss of air from the sides of his mouth. Dumb, dumb bitch.

"You want to see Tracy?"

"Sure."

The little accident, as he was fond of calling her, was at the door, still in her dressing gown.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hello, sweetheart."

She sashayed across the room towards him, her mother's walk in embryo.

"Mummy says you're ill."

I'm getting better."

I'm glad."

"So am I."

"Shall we go out today?'"Maybe."

"See the fair?"

"Maybe."

She pouted fetchingly, perfectly in control of the effect. Raquel's tricks all over again. He just hoped to God she wasn't going to grow up as dumb as her mother.

"We'll see," he said, hoping to imply yes, but knowing he meant no.

She hoisted herself on to his knee and he indulged her tales of a five year old's mischief's for a while, then sent her packing. Talking made his throat hurt, and he didn't feel too much like the loving father today.

Alone again, he watched the shadows waltz on the lawn.

The dogs began to bark just after eleven. Then, after a short while, they fell silent. He got up to find Norton, who was in the kitchen doing a jigsaw with Tracy. "The Hay-Wain' in two thousand pieces. One of Raquel's favourites.

"You check the dogs, Norton?"

"No, boss."

"Well fucking do it."

He didn't often swear in front of the child; but he felt ready to go bang. Norton snapped to it. As he opened the back door Maguire could smell the day. It was tempting to step outside the house. But the dogs barked in a way that set his head thumping and his palms prickling. Tracy had her head down to the business of the jigsaw, her body tense with anticipation of her father's anger. He said nothing, but went straight back into the lounge.

From his chair he could see Norton striding across the lawn. The dogs weren't making a sound now. Norton disappeared from sight behind the greenhouse. A long wait. Maguire was just beginning to get agitated, when Norton appeared again, and looked up at the house, shrugging at Maguire, and speaking. Maguire unlocked the sliding door, opened it and stepped on to the patio. The day met him: balmy.

"What are you saying?" he called to Norton.

"The dogs are fine," Norton returned.

Maguire felt his body relax. Of course the dogs were OK; why shouldn't they bark a bit, what else were they for? He was damn near making a fool of himself, pissing his pants just because the dogs barked. He nodded to Norton and stepped off the patio on to the lawn. Beautiful day, he thought. Quickening his pace he crossed the lawn to the greenhouse, where his carefully nurtured Bonsai trees bloomed. At the door of the greenhouse Norton was waiting dutifully, going through his pockets, looking for mints.

"You want me here, sir?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Sure," he said magnanimously, “you go back up and play with the kid."

Norton nodded.

"Dogs are fine," he said again.

"Yeah."

"Must have been the wind stirred them up."

There was a wind. Warm, but strong. It stirred the line of copper beeches that bounded the garden. They shimmered, and showed the paler undersides of their leaves to the sky, their movement reassuring in its ease and gentility.

Maguire unlocked the greenhouse and stepped into his haven. Here in this artificial Eden were his true loves, nurtured on coos and cuttlefish manure. His Sargent's Juniper, that had survived the rigours of Mount Ishizuchi; his flowering quince, his Yeddo Spruce (Picea Jesoensis), his favourite dwarf, that he'd trained, after several failed attempts, to cling to a stone. All beauties: all minor miracles of winding trunk and cascading needles, worthy of his fondest attention.

Content, mindless for a while of the outside world, he pottered amongst his flora.

The dogs had fought over possession of Ronnie as though he were a plaything. They'd caught him breaching the wall and surrounded him before he could make his escape, grinning as they seized him, tore him and spat him out. He escaped only because Norton had approached, and distracted them from their fury for a moment.

His body was torn in several places after their attack. Confused, concentrating to try and keep his shape coherent, he had narrowly avoided being spotted by Norton.

Now he crept out of hiding. The fight had sapped him of energy, and the shroud gaped, so that the illusion of substance was spoiled. His belly was torn open; his left leg all but severed. The stains had

multiplied; mucus and dog-shit joining the blood. But the will, the will was all. He had come so close; this was not the time to relinquish his grip and let nature take its course. He existed in mutiny against nature, that was his state; and for the first time in his life (and death) he felt an elation. To be unnatural: to be in defiance of system and sanity, was that so bad? He was shitty, bloody, dead and resurrected in a piece of stained cloth; he was a nonsense. Yet lie was. No-one could deny him being, as long as he had the will to be. The thought was delicious: like finding a new sense in a blind, deaf world.

He saw Maguire in the greenhouse and watched him awhile. The enemy was totally absorbed in his hobby; he was even whistling the National Anthem as he tended his flowering charges. Ronnie moved closer to the glass, and closer, his voice an oh-so-gentle moan in the failing weave.

Maguire didn't hear the sigh of cloth on the window, until Ronnie's face pressed flat to the glass, the features smeared and misshapen. He dropped the Yeddo Spruce. It shattered on the floor, its branches broken.

Maguire tried to yell, but all he could squeeze from his vocal cords was a strangled yelp. He broke for the door, as the face, huge with greed for revenge, broke the glass. Maguire didn't quite comprehend what happened next. The way the head and the body seemed to flow through the broken pane, defying physics, and reassembled in his sanctum, taking on the shape of a human being.

No, it wasn't quite human. It had the look of a stroke-victim, its white mask and its white body sagged down the right side, and it dragged its torn leg after it as it lunged at him.

He opened the door and retreated into the garden. The thing followed, speaking now, arms extended towards him. "Maguire…" It said his name in a voice so soft he might have imagined it.

But no, it spoke again.

"Recognise me, Maguire?" it said.

And of course he did, even with its stroke-stricken, billowing features it was clearly Ronnie Glass.

"Glass," he said.

"Yes," said the ghost.

"I don't want -" Maguire began, then faltered. What didn't he want? To speak with this horror, certainly. To know that it existed; that too. To die, most of all. "I don't want to die." "You will," said the ghost.

Maguire felt the gust of the sheet as it flew in his face, or perhaps it was the wind that caught this insubstantial monster and threw it around him.

Whichever, the embrace stank of ether, and disinfectant, and death. Arms of Linen tightened around him, the gaping face was pressed on to his, as though the thing wanted to kiss him.

Instinctively Maguire reached round his attacker, and his hands found the rent the dogs had made in the shroud. His fingers gripped the open edge of the cloth, and he pulled. He was satisfied to hear the linen tearing along its weave, and the bear-hug fell away from him. The shroud bucked in his hand, the liquefied mouth wide in a silent scream.

Ronnie was feeling an agony he thought he'd left behind him with flesh and bone. But here it was again: pain, pain, pain.

He fluttered away from his mutilator, letting out what cry he could, while Maguire stumbled away up the lawn, his eyes huge. The man was close to madness, surely his mind was as good as broken. But that wasn't enough. He had to kill the bastard; that was his promise to himself and he intended to keep it.

The pain didn't disappear, but he tried to ignore it, putting all his energy into pursuing Maguire up the garden towards the house. But he was so weak now: the wind almost had mastery of him; gusting through his form and catching the frayed entrails of his body. He looked like a war-torn flag, fouled so it was scarcely recognisable, and just about ready to call it a day.

Except, except… Maguire.

Maguire reached the house, and slammed the door. The sheet pressed itself against the window, flapping ludicrously, its Linen hands raking the glass, its almost-lost face demanding vengeance.

"Let me in," it said, "I will come in."

Maguire stumbled backwards across the room into the hall.

"Raquel…"

Where was the woman?

"Raquel…?

"Raquel…"

She wasn't in the kitchen. From the den, the sound of Tracy's singing. He peered in. The little girl was alone. She was sitting in the middle of the floor, headphones clamped over her ears, singing along to some favourite song.

"Mummy?" he mimed at her.

"Upstairs," she replied, without taking off the headphones.

Upstairs. As he climbed the stairs he heard the dogs barking down the garden. What was it doing? What was the fucker doing?

"Raquel…? His voice was so quiet he could barely hear it himself. It was as though he'd prematurely become a ghost in his own house.

There was no noise on the landing.

He stumbled into the brown-tiled bathroom and snapped on the light. It was flattering, and he had always liked to look at himself in it. The mellow radiance dulled the edge of age. But now it refused to lie. His face was that of an old and haunted man.

He flung open the airing cupboard and fumbled amongst the warm towels. There! A gun, nestling in scented comfort, hidden away for emergencies only. The contact made him salivate. He snatched the gun and checked it. All in working order. This weapon had brought Glass down once, and it could do it again. And again. And again.

He opened the bedroom door.

"Raquel -"

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, with Norton inserted between her legs. Both still dressed, one of Raquel's sumptuous breasts teased from her bra and pressed into Norton's accommodating mouth. She looked round, dumb as ever, not knowing what she'd done.

Without thinking, he fired.

The bullet found her open-mouthed, gormless as ever, and blew a sizeable hole in her neck. Norton pulled himself out, no necrophiliac

he, and ran towards the window. Quite what he intended wasn't clear. Flight was impossible.

The next bullet caught Norton in the middle of the back, and passed through his body, puncturing the window.

Only then, with her lover dead, did Raquel topple back across the bed, her breast spattered, her legs splayed wide. Maguire watched her fall. The domestic obscenity didn't disgust him; it was quite tolerable. Tit and blood and mouth and lost love and all; it was quite, quite tolerable. Maybe he was becoming insensitive.

He dropped the gun. The dogs had stopped barking.

He slipped out of the room on to the landing, closing the door quietly, so as not to disturb the child.

Mustn't disturb the child. As he walked to the top of the stairs he saw his daughter's winsome face staring up at him from the bottom.

"Daddy."

He stared at her with a puzzled expression.

There was someone at the door. I saw them passing the window."

He started to walk unsteadily down the stairs, one at a time. Slowly does it, he thought. "I opened the door, but there was nobody there." Wall. It must be Wall. He would know what to do for the best. "Was it a tall man?"

"I didn't see him properly, Daddy. Just his face. He was even whiter than you."

The door! Oh Jesus, the door! If she'd left it open. Too late.

The stranger came into the hall and his face crinkled into a kind of smile, which Maguire thought was about the worst thing he'd ever seen.

It wasn't Wall.

Wall was flesh and blood: the visitor was a rag-doll. Wall was a grim man; this one smiled. Wall was life and law and order. This thing wasn't.

It was Glass of course.

Maguire shook his head. The child, not seeing the thing wavering on the air behind her, misunderstood.

"What did I do wrong?" she asked.

Ronnie sailed past her up the stairs, more a shadow now than anything remotely manlike, shreds of cloth trailing behind him. Maguire had no time to resist, nor will left to do so. He opened his mouth to say something in defence of his life, and Ronnie thrust his remaining arm, wound into a rope of linen, down Maguire's throat. Maguire choked on it, but Ronnie snaked on, past his protesting epiglottis, forging a rough way down his esophagus into Maguire's stomach. Maguire felt it there, a fullness that was like overeating, except that it squirmed in the middle of his body, raking his stomach wall and catching hold of the lining. It was all so quick, Maguire had no time to die of suffocation. In the event, he might have wished to go that way, horrid as it would have been. Instead, he felt Ronnie's hand convulse in his belly, digging deeper for a decent grip on his colon, on his duodenum. And when the hand had all it could hold, the fuckhead pulled out his arm.

The exit was swift, but for Maguire the moment would seemingly have no end. He doubled up as the disemboweling began, feeling his viscera surge up his throat, turning him inside out. His lights went out through his throat in a welter of fluids, coffee, blood, acid.

Ronnie pulled on the guts and hauled Maguire, his emptied torso collapsing on itself, towards the top of the stairs. Led by a length of his own entrails Maguire reached the top stair and pitched forward. Ronnie relinquished his hold and Maguire fell, head swathed in gut, to the bottom of the stairs, where his daughter still stood.

She seemed, by her expression, not the least alarmed; but then Ronnie knew children could deceive so easily.

The job completed, he began to totter down the stairs, uncoiling his arm, and shaking his head as he tried to recover a smidgen of human appearance. The effort worked. By the time he reached the child at the bottom of the stairs he was able to offer her something very like a human touch. She didn't respond, and all he could do was leave and hope that in time she'd come to forget.

Once he'd gone Tracy went upstairs to find her mother. Raquel was unresponsive to her questions, as was the man on the carpet by the window. But there was something about him that fascinated her. A

fat, red snake pressing out from his trousers. It made her laugh, it was such a silly little thing.

The girl was still laughing when Wall of the Yard appeared, late as usual. Though viewing the death-dances the house had jumped to he was, on the whole, glad he'd been a late arrival at that particular party.

In the confessional of St Mary Magdalene's the shroud of Ronnie Glass was now corrupted beyond recognition. He had very little feeling left in him, just the desire, so strong he knew he couldn't resist for very much longer, to let go of this wounded body. It had served him well; he had no complaints to make of it. But now he was out of breath. He could animate the inanimate no longer. He wanted to confess though, wanted to confess so very badly. To tell the Father, to tell the Son, to tell the Holy Ghost what sins he'd performed, dreamt, longed for. There was only one thing for it: if Father Rooney wouldn't come to him then he'd go to Father Rooney.

He opened the door of the Confessional. The church was almost empty. It was evening now, he guessed, and who had the time for the lighting of candles when there was food to be cooked, love to be bought, life to be had? Only a Greek florist, praying in the aisle for his sons to be acquitted, saw the shroud stagger from the Confessional towards the door of the Vestry. It looked like some damn-fool adolescent with a filthy sheet slung over his head. The florist hated that kind of Godless behaviour -look where it had got his children – he wanted to beat the kid around a bit, and teach him not to play silly beggars in the House of the Lord.

"Hey, you!" he said, too loudly.

The shroud turned to look at the florist, its eyes like two holes pressed in warm dough. The face of the ghost was so woebegone it froze the words on the florist's lips.

Ronnie tried the handle of the Vestry door. The rattling got him nowhere. The door was locked. From inside, a breathless voice said: "Who is it?" It was Father Rooney speaking. Ronnie tried to reply, but no words would come. All he could do was rattle, like any worthy ghost. "Who is it?" asked the good Father again, a little impatiently. Confess me, Ronnie wanted to say, confess me, for I have sinned.

The door stayed shut. Inside, Father Rooney was busy. He was taking photographs for his private collection; his subject a favourite

lady of his by the name of Natalie. A daughter of vice somebody had told him, but he couldn't believe that. She was too obliging, too cherubic, and she wound a rosary around her pert bosom as though she was barely out of a convent.

The jiggling of the handle had stopped now. Good, thought Father Rooney. They'd come back, whoever they were. Nothing was that urgent. Father Rooney grinned at the woman. Natalie's lips pouted back.

In the church Ronnie hauled himself to the altar, and genuflected. Three rows back the florist rose from his prayers, incensed by this desecration. The boy was obviously drunk, the way he was reeling, the man wasn't about to be frightened by a tuppenny-coloured death-mask. Cursing the desecrator in ripe Greek, he snatched at the ghost as it knelt in front of the altar.

There was nothing under the sheet: nothing at all.

The florist felt the living cloth twitch in his hand, and dropped it with a tiny cry. Then he backed off down the aisle, crossing himself back and forth, back and forth, like a demented widow. A few yards from the door of the church he turned tail and ran.

The shroud lay where the florist had dropped it. Ronnie, lingering in the creases, looked up from the crumpled heap at the splendour of the altar. It was radiant, even in the gloom of the candlelit interior, and moved by its beauty, he was content to put the illusion behind him. Unconfessed, but unfearful of judgment, his spirit crept away.

After an hour or so Father Rooney unbolted the Vestry, escorted the chaste Natalie out of the church, and locked the front door. He peered into the Confessional on his way back, to check for hiding children. Empty, the entire church was empty. St Mary Magdalene was a forgotten woman.

As he meandered, whistling, back to the Vestry he caught sight of Ronnie Glass' shroud. It lay sprawled on the altar steps, a forlorn pile of shabby cloth. Ideal, he thought, picking it up. There were some indiscreet stains on the Vestry floor. Just the job to wipe them up.

He sniffed the cloth, he loved to sniff. It smelt of a thousand things. Ether, sweat, dogs, entrails, blood, disinfectant, empty rooms, broken hearts, flowers and loss. Fascinating. This was the thrill of the Parish of Soho, he thought. Something new every day. Mysteries on the doorstep, on the altar-step. Crimes so numerous they would need an

ocean of Holy Water to wash them out. Vice for sale on every corner, if you knew where to look.

He tucked the shroud under his arm.

"I bet you've got a tale to tell," he said, snuffing out the votive candles with fingers too hot to feel the flame.

XV: SCAPE-GOATS

It wasn't a real island the tide had carried us on to, it was a lifeless mound of stones. Calling a hunch-backed shit-pile like this an island is flattery. Islands are oases in the sea: green and abundant. This is a forsaken place: no seals in the water around it, no birds in the air above it. I can think of no use for a place like this, except that you could say of it: I saw the heart of nothing, and survived.

"It's not on any of the charts," said Ray, poring over the map of the Inner Hebrides, his nail at the spot where he'd calculated that we should be. It was, as he'd said, an empty space on the map, just pale blue sea without the merest speck to sign the existence of this rock. It wasn't just the seals and the birds that ignored it then, the chart-makers had too. There were one or two arrows in the vicinity of Ray's finger, marking the currents that should have been taking us north: tiny red darts on a paper ocean. The rest, like the world outside, was deserted.

Jonathan was jubilant of course, once he discovered that the place wasn't even to be found on the map; he seemed to feel instantly exonerated. The blame for our being here wasn't his any longer, it was the map-makers': he wasn't going to be held responsible for our being beached if the mound wasn't even marked on the charts. The apologetic expression he'd worn since our unscheduled arrival was replaced with a look of self-satisfaction.

"You can't avoid a place that doesn't exist, can you?" he crowed. "I mean, can you?"

"You could have used the eyes God gave you," Ray flung back at him; but Jonathan wasn't about to be cowed by reasonable criticism.

"It was so sudden, Raymond," he said. "I mean, in this mist I didn't have a chance. It was on top of us before I knew it."

It had been sudden, no two ways about that. I'd been in the galley preparing breakfast, which had become my responsibility since neither Angela nor Jonathan showed any enthusiasm for the task, when the hull of the "Emmanuelle' grated on shingle, then ploughed her way, juddering, up on to the stony beach. There was a moment's silence: then the shouting began. I climbed up out of the galley to find Jonathan standing on deck, grinning sheepishly and waving his arms around to semaphore his innocence.

"Before you ask," he said, "I don't know how it happened. One minute we were just coasting along -"

"Oh Jesus Christ all-fucking Mighty," Ray was clambering out of the cabin, hauling a pair of jeans on as he did so, and looking much the worse for a night in a bunk with Angela. I'd had the questionable honour of listening to her orgasms all night; she was certainly demanding. Jonathan began his defence-speech again from the beginning: "Before you ask -", but Ray silenced him with a few choice insults. I retreated into the confines of the galley while the argument raged on deck. It gave me no small satisfaction to hear Jonathan slanged; I even hoped Ray would lose his cool enough to bloody that perfect hook nose.

The galley was a slop bucket. The breakfast I'd been preparing was all over the floor and I left it there, the yolks of the eggs, the gammon and the french toasts all congealing in pools of spilt fat. It was Jonathan's fault; let him clear it up. I poured myself a glass of grapefruit juice, waited until the recriminations died down, and went back up.

It was barely two hours after dawn, and the mist that had shrouded this island from Jonathan's view still covered the sun. If today was anything like the week that we'd had so far, by noon the deck would be too hot to step on barefoot, but now, with the mist still thick, I felt cold wearing just the bottom of my bikini. It didn't matter much, sailing amongst the islands, what you wore. There was no one to see you. I'd got the best all over tan I'd ever had. But this morning the chill drove me back below to find a sweater. There was no wind: the cold was coming up out of the sea. It's still night down there, I thought, just a few yards off the beach; limitless night.

I pulled on a sweater, and went back on deck. The maps were out, and Ray was bending over them. His bare back was peeling from an excess of sun, and I could see the bald patch he tried to hide in his dirty-yellow curls. Jonathan was staring at the beach and stroking his nose.

"Christ, what a place," I said. He glanced at me, trying a smile. He had this illusion, poor Jonathan, that his face could charm a tortoise out of its shell, and to be fair to him there were a few women who melted if he so much as looked at them. I wasn't one of them, and it irritated him. I'd always thought his Jewish good looks too bland to be beautiful. My indifference was a red rag to him.

A voice, sleepy and pouting, drifted up from below deck. Our Lady of the Bunk was awake at last: time to make her late entrance, coyly wrapping a towel around her nakedness as she emerged. Her face was puffed up with too much red wine, and her hair needed a comb through it. Still she turned on the radiance, eyes wide, Shirley Temple with cleavage.

"What's happening, Ray? Where are we?"

Ray didn't look up from his computations, which earned him a frown.

"We've got a bloody awful navigator, that's all," he said. I don't even know what happened," Jonathan protested, clearly hoping for a show of sympathy from Angela. None was forthcoming.

"But where are we?" she asked again.

"Good morning, Angela," I said; I too was ignored.

"Is it an island?" she said.

"Of course it's an island: I just don't know which one yet," Ray replied.

"Perhaps it's Barra," she suggested.

Ray pulled a face. "We're nowhere near Barra," he said. "If you'll just let me retrace our steps -”

Retrace our steps, in the sea? Just Ray's Jesus fixation, I thought, looking back at the beach. It was impossible to guess how big the place was, the mist erased the landscape after a hundred yards. Perhaps somewhere in that grey wall there was human habitation.

Ray, having located the blank spot on the map where we were supposedly stranded, climbed down on to the beach and took a critical look at the bow. More to be out of Angela's way than anything else I climbed down to join him. The round stones of the beach were cold and slippery on the bare soles of my feet. Ray smoothed his palm down the side of the "Emmanuelle', almost a caress, then crouched to look at the damage to the bow. "I don't think we're holed," he said, “but I can't be sure." "We'll float off come high tide," said Jonathan, posing on the bow, hands on hips, “no sweat," he winked at me, “no sweat at all."

"Will we shit float off!", Ray snapped. Take a look for yourself."

"Then we'll get some help to haul us off." Jonathan's confidence was unscathed.

"And you can damn well fetch someone, you asshole."

"Sure, why not? Give it an hour or so for the fog to shift and I'll take a walk, find some help."

He sauntered away.

I'll put on some coffee," Angela volunteered.

Knowing her, that'd take an hour to brew. There was time for a stroll.

I started along the beach.

"Don't go too far, love," Ray called.

"No."

Love, he said. Easy word; he meant nothing by it.

The sun was warmer now, and as I walked I stripped off the sweater. My bare breasts were already brown as two nuts, and, I thought, about as big. Still, you can't have everything. At least I'd got two neurons in my head to rub together, which was more than could be said for Angela; she had tits like melons and a brain that'd shame a mule.

The sun still wasn't getting through the mist properly. It was filtering down on the island fitfully, and its light flattened everything out, draining the place of colour or weight, reducing the sea and the rocks and the rubbish on the beach to one bleached-out grey, the colour of over-boiled meat.

After only a hundred yards something about the place began to depress me, so I turned back. On my right tiny, lisping waves crept up to the shore and collapsed with a weary slopping sound on the stones. No majestic rollers here: just the rhythmical slop, slop, slop of an exhausted tide. I hated the place already.

Back at the boat, Ray was trying the radio, but for some reason all he could get was a blanket of white noise on every frequency. He cursed it awhile, then gave up. After half an hour, breakfast was

served, though we had to make do with sardines, tinned mushrooms and the remains of the French toast. Angela served this feast with her usual aplomb, looking as though she was performing a second miracle with loaves and fishes. It was all but impossible to enjoy the food anyway; the air seemed to drain all the taste away.

"Funny isn't it -" began Jonathan.

"Hilarious," said Ray.

" – there's no fog-horns. Mist, but no horns. Not even the sound of a motor; weird."

He was right. Total silence wrapped us up, a damp and smothering hush. Except for the apologetic slop of the waves and the sound of our voices, we might as well have been deaf.

I sat at the stern and looked into the empty sea. It was still grey, but the sun was beginning to strike other colours in it now: a somber green, and, deeper, a hint of blue-purple. Below the boat I could see strands of kelp and Maiden's Hair, toys to the tide, swaying. It looked inviting: and anything was better than the sour atmosphere on the "Emmanuelle'.

"I'm going for a swim," I said.

"I wouldn't, love," Ray replied.

"Why not?"

"The current that threw us up here must be pretty strong, you don't want to get caught in it."

"But the tide's still coming in: I'd only be swept back to the beach."

"You don't know what cross-currents there are out there. Whirlpools even: they're quite common. Suck you down in a flash."

I looked out to sea again. It looked harmless enough, but then I'd read that these were treacherous waters, and thought better of it.

Angela had started a little sulking session because nobody had finished her immaculately prepared breakfast. Ray was playing up to it. He loved babying her, letting her play damn stupid games. It made me sick.

I went below to do the washing-up, tossing the slops out of the

porthole into the sea. They didn't sink immediately. They floated in an oily patch, half-eaten mushrooms and slivers of sardines bobbing around on the surface, as though someone had thrown up on the sea. Food for crabs, if any self-respecting crab condescended to live here.

Jonathan joined me in the galley, obviously still feeling a little foolish, despite the bravado. He stood in the doorway, trying to catch my eye, while I pumped up some cold water into the bowl and half-heartedly rinsed the greasy plastic plates. All he wanted was to be told I didn't think this was his fault, and yes, of course he was a kosher Adonis. I said nothing. "Do you mind if I lend a hand?" he said. "There's not really room for two," I told him, trying not to sound too dismissive. He flinched nevertheless: this whole episode had punctured his self-esteem more badly than I'd realized, despite his strutting around.

"Look," I said gently, “why don't you go back on deck: take in the sun before it gets too hot?"

"I feel like a shit," he said. "It was an accident."

"An utter shit."

"Like you said, we'll float off with the tide."

He moved out of the doorway and down into the galley; his proximity made me feel almost claustrophobic. His body was too large for the space: too tanned, too assertive. "I said there wasn't any room, Jonathan." He put his hand on the back of my neck, and instead of shrugging it off I let it stay there, gently massaging the muscles. I wanted to tell him to leave me alone, but the lassitude of the place seemed to have got into my system. His other hand was palm-down on my belly, moving up to my breast. I was indifferent to these ministrations: if he wanted this he could have it.

Above deck Angela was gasping in the middle of a giggling-fit, almost choking on her hysteria. I could see her in my mind's eye, throwing back her head, shaking her hair loose. Jonathan had unbuttoned his shorts, and had let them drop. The gift of his foreskin to God had been neatly made; his erection was so hygienic in its enthusiasm it seemed incapable of the least harm. I let his mouth stick to mine, let his tongue explore my gums, insistent as a dentist's finger. He slid my bikini down far enough to get access, fumbled to position himself, then pressed in.

Behind him, the stair creaked, and I looked over his shoulder in

time to glimpse Ray, bending at the hatch and staring down at Jonathan's buttocks and at the tangle of our arms. Did he see, I wondered, that I felt nothing; did he understand that I did this dispassionately, and could only have felt a twinge of desire if I substituted his head, his back, his cock for Jonathan's? Soundlessly, he withdrew from the stairway; a moment passed, in 1which Jonathan said he loved me, then I heard Angela's laughter begin again as Ray described what he'd just witnessed. Let the bitch think whatever she pleased: I didn't care.

Jonathan was still working at me with deliberate but uninspired strokes, a frown on his face like that of a schoolboy trying to solve some impossible equation. Discharge came without warning, signaled only by a tightening of his hold on my shoulders, and a deepening of his frown. His thrusts slowed and stopped; his eyes found mine for a flustered moment. I wanted to kiss him, but he'd lost all interest. He withdrew still hard, wincing. "I'm always sensitive when I've come," he murmured, hauling his shorts up. "Was it good for you?"

I nodded. It was laughable; the whole thing was laughable. Stuck in the middle of nowhere with this little boy of twenty-six, and Angela, and a man who didn't care if I lived or died. But then perhaps neither did I.

I thought, for no reason, of the slops on the sea, bobbing around, waiting for the next wave to catch them.

Jonathan had already retreated up the stairs. I boiled up some coffee, standing staring out of the porthole and feeling his come dry to a corrugated pearliness on the inside of my thigh.

Ray and Angela had gone by the time I'd brewed the coffee, off for a walk on the island apparently, looking for help.

Jonathan was sitting in my place at the stern, gazing out at the mist. More to break the silence than anything I said: "I think it's lifted a bit."

"Has it?"

I put a mug of black coffee beside him.

Thanks."

"Where are the others?"

"Exploring."

He looked round at me, confusion in his eyes.

"I still feel like a shit."

I noticed the bottle of gin on the deck beside him.

"Bit early for drinking, isn't it?"

"Want some?"

"It's not even eleven."

"Who cares?"

He pointed out to sea. "Follow my finger," he said.

I leaned over his shoulder and did as he asked.

"No, you're not looking at the right place. Follow my finger – see it?"'Nothing."

"At the edge of the mist. It appears and disappears. There! Again!"

I did see something in the water, twenty or thirty yards from the "Emmanuelle's' stern. Brown-coloured, wrinkled, turning over.

"It's a seal," I said.

"I don't think so."

"The sun's warming up the sea. They're probably coming in to bask in the shallows."

"It doesn't look like a seal. It rolls in a funny way -”

"Maybe a piece of flotsam -”

"Could be."

He swigged deeply from the bottle.

"Leave some for tonight."

"Yes, mother."

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Just the waves on the beach. Slop. Slop. Slop.

Once in a while the seal, or whatever it was, broke surface, rolled, and disappeared again.

Another hour, I thought, and the tide will begin to turn. Float us off this little afterthought of creation.

"Hey!" Angela's voice, from a distance. "Hey, you guys!"

You guys she called us.

Jonathan stood up, hand up to his face against the glare of sunlit rock. It was much brighter now: and getting hotter all the time.

"She's waving to us," he said, disinterested.

"Let her wave."

"You guys!" she screeched, her arms waving. Jonathan cupped his hands around his mouth and bawled a reply: "What-do-you-want?"

"Come and see," she replied.

"She wants us to come and see."

"I heard."

"Come on," he said, “nothing to lose."

I didn't want to move, but he hauled me up by the arm. It wasn't worth arguing. His breath was inflammable.

It was difficult making our way up the beach. The stones were not wet with sea-water, but covered in a slick film of grey-green algae, like sweat on a skull. Jonathan was having even more difficulty getting across the beach than I was. Twice he lost his balance and fell heavily on his backside, cursing. The seat of his shorts was soon a filthy olive colour, and there was a tear where his buttocks showed.

I was no ballerina, but I managed to make it, step by slow step, trying to avoid the large rocks so that if I slipped I wouldn't have far to fall.

Every few yards we'd have to negotiate a line of stinking seaweed. I was able to jump them with reasonable elegance but Jonathan, pissed and uncertain of his balance, ploughed through them, his naked feet completely buried in the stuff. It wasn't just kelp: there was the usual detritus washed up on any beach: the broken bottles, the rusting Coke

cans, the scum-stained cork, globs of tar, fragments of crabs, pale-yellow durex. And crawling over these stinking piles of dross were inch-long, fat-eyed blue flies. Hundreds of them, clambering over the shit, and over each other, buzzing to be alive, and alive to be buzzing.

It was the first life we'd seen.

I was doing my best not to fall flat on my face as I stepped across one of these lines of seaweed, when a little avalanche of pebbles began off to my left. Three, four, five stones were skipping over each other towards the sea, and setting another dozen stones moving as they jumped.

There was no visible cause for the effect.

Jonathan didn't even bother to look up; he was having too much trouble staying vertical.

The avalanche stopped: run out of energy. Then another: this time between us and the sea. Skipping stones: bigger this time than the last, and gaining more height as they leapt.

The sequence was longer than before: it knocked stone into stone until a few pebbles actually reached the sea at the end of the dance.

Plop.

Dead noise.

Plop. Plop.

Ray appeared from behind one of the big boulders at the height of the beach, beaming like a loon.

There's life on Mars," he yelled and ducked back the way he'd come.

A few more perilous moments and we reached him, the sweat sticking our hair to our foreheads like caps.

Jonathan looked a little sick. "What's the big deal?" he demanded.

"Look what we've found," said Ray, and led the way beyond the boulders.

The first shock.

Once we got to the height of the beach we were looking down on to

the other side of the island. There was more of the same drab beach, and then sea. No inhabitants, no boats, no sign of human existence. The whole place couldn't have been more than half a mile across: barely the back of a whale.

But there was some life here; that was the second shock.

In the sheltering ring of the large, bald, boulders, which crowned the island was a fenced-in compound. The posts were rotting in the salt air, but a tangle of rusted barbed-wire had been wound around and between them to form a primitive pen. Inside the pen there was a patch of coarse grass, and on this pitiful lawn stood three sheep. And Angela.

She was standing in the penal colony, stroking one of the inmates and cooing in its blank face.

"Sheep," she said, triumphantly.

Jonathan was there before me with his snapped remark: "So what?"

"Well it's strange, isn't it?" said Ray. Three sheep in the middle of a little place like this?"

"They don't look well to me," said Angela.

She was right. The animals were the worse for their exposure to the elements; their eyes were gummy with matter, and their fleeces hung off their hides in knotted clumps, exposing panting flanks. One of them had collapsed against the barbed-wire, and seemed unable to right itself again, either too depleted or too sick.

"It's cruel," said Angela.

I had to agree: it seemed positively sadistic, locking up these creatures without more than a few blades of grass to chew on, and a battered tin bath of stagnant water, to quench their thirst.

"Odd isn't is?" said Ray.

"I've cut my foot." Jonathan was squatting on the top of one of the flatter boulders, peering at the underside of his right foot.

There's glass on the beach," I said, exchanging a vacant stare with one of the sheep.

They're so dead-pan," said Ray. "Nature's straight men."

Curiously, they didn't look so unhappy with their condition, their stares were philosophical. Their eyes said: I'm just a sheep, I don't expect you to like me, care for me, preserve me, except for your stomach's sake. There were no angry baas, no stamping of a frustrated hoof.

Just three grey sheep, waiting to die.

Ray had lost interest in the business. He was wandering back down the beach, kicking a can ahead of him. It rattled and skipped, reminding me of the stones.

"We should let them free," said Angela.

I ignored her; what was freedom in a place like this? She persisted, "Don't you think we should?"

"No."

They'll die."

"Somebody put them here for a reason."

"But they'll die."

They'll die on the beach if we let them out. There's no food for them."

"We'll feed them."

"French toast and gin," suggested Jonathan, picking a sliver of glass from his sole.

"We can't just leave them."

"It's not our business," I said. It was all getting boring. Three sheep. Who cared if they lived or I'd thought that about myself an hour earlier. We had something in common, the sheep and I.

My head was aching.

They'll die," whined Angela, for the third time.

"You're a stupid bitch," Jonathan told her. The remark was made without malice: he said it calmly, as a statement of plain fact.

I couldn't help grinning.

"What?" She looked as though she'd been bitten.

"Stupid bitch," he said again. "B-I-T-C-H."

Angela flushed with anger and embarrassment, and turned on him. "You got us stuck here," she said, lip curling.

The inevitable accusation. Tears in her eyes. Stung by his words…

"I did it deliberately," he said, spitting on his fingers and rubbing saliva into the cut. "I wanted to see if we could leave you here."

"You're drunk. "And you're stupid. But I'll be sober in the morning."

The old lines still made their mark.

Outstripped, Angela started down the beach after Ray, trying to hold back her tears until she was out of sight. I almost felt some sympathy for her. She was, when it came down to verbal fisticuffs, easy meat.

"You're a bastard when you want to be," I told Jonathan; he just looked at me, glassy-eyed.

"Better be friends. Then I won't be a bastard to you."

"You don't scare me."

"I Know."

The mutton was staring at me again. I stared back.

"Fucking sheep," he said.

"They can't help it."

"If they had any decency, they'd slit their ugly fucking throats."

"I'm going back to the boat."

"Ugly fuckers."

"Coming?"

He took hold of my hand: fast, tight, and held it in his hand like he'd never let go. Eyes on me suddenly.

"Don't go."

"It's too hot up here."

"Stay. The stone's nice and warm. Lie down. They won't interrupt us this time."

"You knew?" I said.

"You mean Ray? Of course I knew. I thought we put on quite a little performance."

He drew me close, hand over hand up my arm, like he was hauling in a rope. The smell of him brought back the galley, his frown, his muttered profession ('Love you'), the quiet retreat.

Dйja vu.

Still, what was there to do on a day like this but go round in the same dreary circle, like the sheep in the pen? Round and round. Breathe, sex, eat, shit.

The gin had gone to his groin. He tried his best but he hadn't got a hope. It was like trying to thread spaghetti.

Exasperated, he rolled off me.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

Senseless word, once it was repeated, it had lost all its meaning, like everything else. Signifying nothing. "It doesn't matter," I said.

"Fuck off."

"It really doesn't."

He didn't look at me, just stared down at his cock. If he'd had a knife in his hand at that moment, I think he'd have cut it off and laid it on the warm rock, a shrine to sterility.

I left him studying himself, and walked back to the "Emmanuelle'. Something odd struck me as I went, something I hadn't noticed before. The blue flies, instead of jumping ahead of me as I approached, just let themselves be trodden on. Positively lethargic; or suicidal. They sat on the hot stones and popped under my soles, their gaudy little lives going out like so many lights.

The mist was disappearing at last, and as the air warmed up, the island unveiled its next disgusting trick: the smell. The fragrance was

as wholesome as a roomful of rotting peaches, thick and sickly. It came in through the pores as well as the nostrils, like a syrup. And under the sweetness, something else, rather less pleasant than peaches, fresh or rotten. A smell like an open drain clogged with old meat: like the gutters of a slaughterhouse, caked with suet and black blood. It was the seaweed I assumed, although I'd never smelt anything to match the stench on any other beach.

I was half-way back to the "Emmanuelle', holding my nose as I stepped over the bands of rotting weed, when I heard the noise of a little murder behind me. Jonathan's whoops of satanic glee almost drowned the pathetic voice of the sheep as it was killed, but I knew instinctively what the drunken bastard had done.

I turned back, my heel pivoting on the slime. It was almost certainly too late to save one of the beasts, but maybe I could prevent him massacring the other two. I couldn't see the pen; it was hidden behind the boulders, but I could hear Jonathan's triumphant yells, and the thud, thud of his strokes. I knew what I'd see before it came into sight.

The grey-green lawn had turned red. Jonathan was in the pen with the sheep. The two survivors were charging back and forth in a rhythmical trot of panic, baaing in terror, while Jonathan stood over the third sheep, erect now. The victim had partially collapsed, its stick-like front legs buckled beneath it, its back legs rigid with approaching death. Its bulk shuddered with nervous spasms, and its eyes showed more white than brown. The top of its skull had been almost entirely dashed to pieces, and the grey hash of its brain exposed, punctured by shards of its own bone, and pulped by the large round stone that Jonathan was still wielding. Even as I watched he brought the weapon down once more onto the sheep's brain-pan. Globs of tissue flew off in every direction, speckling me with hot matter and blood. Jonathan looked like some nightmare lunatic (which for that moment, I suppose, he was). His naked body, so recently white, was stained as a butcher's apron after a hard day's hammering at the abattoir. His face was more sheep's gore than Jonathan The animal itself was dead. Its pathetic complaints had ceased completely. It keeled over, rather comically, like a cartoon character, one of its ears snagging the wire. Jonathan watched it fall: his face a grin under the blood. Oh that grin: it served so many purposes. Wasn't that the same smile he charmed women with? The same grin that spoke lechery and love? Now, at last, it was put to its true purpose: the gawping smile of the satisfied savage, standing over his prey with a stone in one hand and his manhood in the other.

Then, slowly, the smile decayed, as his senses returned.

"Jesus," he said, and from his abdomen a wave of revulsion climbed up his body. I could see it quite clearly; the way his gut rolled as a throb of nausea threw his head forward, pitching half-digested gin and toast over the grass.

I didn't move. I didn't want to comfort him, calm him, console him – he was simply beyond my help.

I turned away.

"Frankie," he said through a throat of bile.

I couldn't bring myself to look at him. There was nothing to be done for the sheep, it was dead and gone; all I wanted to do was run away from that little ring of stones, and put the sight out of my head.

"Frankie."

I began to walk, as fast as I was able over such tricky terrain, back down towards the beach and the relative sanity of the "Emmanuelle'.

The smell was stronger now: coming up out of the ground towards my face in filthy waves.

Horrible island. Vile, stinking, insane island.

All I thought was hate as I stumbled across the weed and the filth. The "Emmanuelle' wasn't far off -Then, a little pattering of pebbles like before. I stopped, balancing uneasily on the sleek dome of a stone, and looked to my left, where even now one of the pebbles was rolling to a halt. As it stopped another, larger pebble, fully six inches across, seemed to move spontaneously from its resting place, and roll down the beach, striking its neighbours and beginning another exodus towards the sea. I frowned: the frown made my head buzz.

Was there some sort of animal – a crab maybe – under the beach, moving the stones? Or was it the heat that in some way twitched them into life?

Again: a bigger stone I walked on, while behind the rattle and patter continued, one little sequence coming close upon another, to make an almost seamless percussion.

I began, without real focus or explanation, to be afraid.

Angela and Ray were sunning themselves on the deck of the "Emmanuelle'.

"Another couple of hours before we can start to get the bitch off her backside," he said, squinting as he looked up at me.

I thought he meant Angela at first, then realised he was talking about floating the boat out to sea again.

"May as well get some sun." he smiled wanly at me.

"Yeah."

Angela was either asleep or ignoring me. Whichever, it suited me fine.

I slumped down on the sun-deck at Ray's feet and let the sun soak into me. The specks of blood had dried on my skin, like tiny scabs. I picked them off idly, and listened to the noise of the stones, and the slop of the sea.

Behind me, pages were being turned. I glanced round. Ray, never able to lie still for very long, was flicking through a library book on the Hebrides he'd brought from home.

I looked back at the sun. My mother always said it burned a hole in the back of your eye, to look straight into the sun, but it was hot and alive up there; I wanted to look into its face. There was a chill in me – I don't know where it had come from – a chill in my gut and in between my legs – that wouldn't go away. Maybe I would have to burn it away by looking at the sun.

Some way along the beach I glimpsed Jonathan, tiptoeing down towards the sea. From that distance the mixture of blood and white skin made him look like some pie-bald freak. He'd stripped off his shorts and he was crouching at the sea's edge to wash off the sheep.

Then, Ray's voice, very quietly: "Oh God," he said, in such an understated way that I knew the news couldn't be brilliant.

"What is it?"

"I've found out where we are."

"Good."

"No, not good."

"Why? What's wrong?" I sat upright, turning to him.

"It's here, in the book. There's a paragraph on this place."

Angela opened one eye. "Well?" she said.

"It's not just an island. It's a burial mound."

The chill in between my legs fed upon itself, and grew gross. The sun wasn't hot enough to warm me that deep, where I should be hottest.

I looked away from Ray along the beach again. Jonathan was still washing, splashing water up on to his chest. The shadows of the stones suddenly seemed very black and heavy, their edges pressed down on the upturned faces of seeing me looking his way Jonathan waved.

Can it be there are corpses under those stones? Buried face up to the sun, like holiday-makers laid out on a Blackpool beach?

The world is monochrome. Sun and shadow. The white tops of stones and their black underbellies. Life on top, death underneath.

"Burial?" said Angela. "What sort of burial?"

"War dead," Ray answered.

Angela: "What, you mean Vikings or something?"

"World War 1, World War 11. Soldiers from torpedoed troop-ships, sailors washed up. Brought down here by the Gulf Stream; apparently the current funnels them through the straits and washes them up on the beaches of the islands around here."

"Washes them up?" said Angela.

"That's what it says."

"Not any longer though."

"I'm sure the occasional fisherman gets buried here still," Ray replied.

Jonathan had stood up, staring out to sea, the blood off his body. His hand shaded his eyes as he looked out over the bluegrey water, and I followed his gaze as I had followed his finger. A hundred yards

out that seal, or whale, or whatever it was, had returned, lolling in the water. Sometimes, as it turned, it threw up a fin, like a swimmer's arm, beckoning.

"How many people were buried?" asked Angela, nonchalantly. She seemed completely unperturbed by the fact that we were sitting on a grave.

"Hundreds probably."

"Hundreds?"

"It just says 'many dead', in the book."

"And do they put them in coffins?"

"How should I know?"

What else could it be, this God-forsaken mound – but a cemetery? I looked at the island with new eyes, as though I'd just recognised it for what it was. Now I had a reason to despise its humpy back, its sordid beach, the smell of peaches.

"I wonder if they buried them all over," mused Angela, “or just at the top of the hill, where we found the sheep? Probably just at the top; out of the way of the water."

Yes, they'd probably had too much of water: their poor green faces picked by fish, their uniforms rotted, their dog-tags encrusted with algae. What deaths; and worse, what journeys after death, in squads of fellow corpses, along the Gulf Stream to this bleak landfall. I saw them, in my mind's eye, the bodies of the soldiers, subject to every whim of the tide, borne backwards and forwards in a slush of rollers until a casual limb snagged on a rock, and the sea lost possession of them. With each receding wave uncovered; sodden and jellied brine, spat out by the sea to stink a while and be stripped by gulls.

I had a sudden, morbid desire to walk on the beach again, armed with this knowledge, kicking over the pebbles in the hope of turning up a bone or two.

As the thought formed, my body made the decision for me. I was standing: I was climbing off the "Emmanuelle'.

"Where are you off to?" said Angela.

"Jonathan," I murmured, and set foot on the mound.

The stench was clearer now: that was the accrued odour of the dead. Maybe drowned men got buried here still, as Ray had suggested, slotted under the pile of stones. The unwary yachtsman, the careless swimmer, their faces wiped off with water. At the feet the beach flies were less sluggish than they'd been: instead of waiting to be killed they jumped and buzzed ahead of my steps, with a new enthusiasm for life.

Jonathan was not to be seen. His shorts were still on the stones at the water's edge, but he'd disappeared. I looked out to sea: nothing: no bobbing head: no lolling, beckoning something.

I called his name.

My voice seemed to excite the files, they rose in seething clouds. Jonathan didn't reply.

I began to walk along the margin of the sea, my feet sometimes caught by an idle wave, as often as not left untouched. I realised I hadn't told Angela and Ray about the dead sheep. Maybe that was a secret between us four. Jonathan, myself, and the two survivors in the pen.

Then I saw him: a few yards ahead – his chest white, wide and clean, every speck of blood washed off. A secret it is then," I thought.

"Where have you been?" I called to him.

"Walking it off," he called back.

"What off?"

"Too much gin," he grinned.

I returned the smile, spontaneously; he'd said he loved me in the galley; that counted for something.

Behind him, a rattle of skipping stones. He was no more than ten yards from me now, shamelessly naked as he walked; his gait was sober.

The rattle of stones suddenly seemed rhythmical. It was no longer a random series of notes as one pebble struck another – it was a beat, a sequence of repeated sounds, a tick-tap pulse.

No accident: intention.

Not chance: purpose.

Not stone: thought. Behind stone, with stone, carrying stone Jonathan, now close, was bright. His skin was almost luminous with sun on it, thrown into relief by the darkness behind him.

Wait – What darkness?

The stone mounted the air like a bird, defying gravity. A blank black stone, disengaged from the earth. It was the size of a baby: a whistling baby, and it grew behind Jonathan's head as it shimmered down the air towards him.

The beach had been flexing its muscles, tossing small pebbles down to the sea, all the time strengthening its will to raise this boulder off the ground and fling it at Jonathan.

It swelled behind him, murderous in its intention, but my throat had no sound to make worthy of my fright.

Was he deaf? His grin broke open again; he thought the horror on my face was a jibe at his nakedness, I realized. He doesn't understand. The stone sheered off the top of his head, from the middle of his nose upwards, leaving his mouth still wide, his tongue rooted in blood, and flinging the rest of his beauty towards me in a cloud of wet red dust. The upper part of his head was spilt on to the face of the stone, its expression intact as it swooped towards me. I half fell, and it screamed past me, veering off towards the sea. Once over the water the assassin seemed to lose its will somehow, and faltered in the air before plunging into the waves.

At my feet, blood. A trail that led to where Jonathan's body lay, the open edge of his head towards me, its machinery plain for the sky to see.

I was still not screaming, though for sanity's sake I had to unleash the terror suffocating me. Somebody must hear me, hold me, take me away and explain to me, before the skipping pebbles found their rhythm again. Or worse, before the minds below the beach, unsatisfied with murder by proxy, rolled away their grave stones and rose to kiss me themselves.

But the scream would not come.

All I could hear was the patter of stones to my right and left. They intend to kill us all for invading their sacred ground. Stoned to death, like heretics.

Then, a voice.

“For Christ's sake -“

A man's voice; but not Ray's.

He seemed to have appeared from out of thin air: a short, broad man, standing at the sea's edge. In one hand a bucket and under his arm a bundle of coarsely-cut hay. Food for the sheep, I thought, through a jumble of half-formed words. Food for sheep.

He stared at me, then down at Jonathan's body, his old eyes wild.

"What's gone on?" he said. The Gaelic accent was thick. "In the name of Christ what's gone on?"

I shook my head. It seemed loose on my neck, almost as though I might shake it off. Maybe I pointed to the sheep-pen, maybe not. Whatever the reason he seemed to know what I was thinking, and began to climb the beach towards the crown of the island, dropping bucket and bundle as he went.

Half-blind with confusion, I followed, but before I could reach the boulders he was out of their shadow again, his face suddenly shining with panic.

"Who did that?"

"Jonathan," I replied. I cast a hand towards the corpse, not daring to look back at him. The man cursed in Gaelic, and stumbled out of the shelter of the boulders.

"What have you done?" he yelled at me. "My Christ, what have you done? Killing their gifts."

"Just sheep," I said. In my head the instant of Jonathan's decapitation was playing over and over again, a loop of slaughter.

"They demand it, don't you see, or they rise -”

"Who rise?" I said, knowing. Seeing the stones shift.

"All of them. Put away without grief or mourning. But they've got

the sea in them, in their heads -”

I knew what he was talking about: it was quite plain to me, suddenly. The dead were here: as we knew. Under the stones. But they had the rhythm of the sea in them, and they wouldn't lie down. So to placate them, these sheep were tethered in a pen, to be offered up to their wills.

Did the dead eat mutton? No; it wasn't food they wanted. It was the gesture of recognition – as simple as that.

"Drowned," he was saying, “all drowned."

Then, the familiar patter began again, the drumming of stones, which grew, without warning, into an ear-splitting thunder, as though the entire beach was shifting.

And under the cacophony three other sounds: splashing, screaming and wholesale destruction.

I turned to see a wave of stones rising into the air on the other side of the island. Again the terrible screams, wrung from a body that was being buffeted and broken.

They were after the "Emmanuelle'. After Ray. I started to run in the direction of the boat, the beach rippling beneath my feet. Behind me, I could hear the boots of the sheep-feeder on the stones. As we ran the noise of the assault became louder. Stones danced in the air like fat birds, blocking the sun, before plunging down to strike at some unseen target. Maybe the boat. Maybe flesh itself Angela's tormented screams had ceased. I rounded the beach-head a few steps ahead of the sheep-feeder, and the "Emmanuelle' came into sight. It, and its human contents, were beyond all hope of salvation. The vessel was being bombarded by endless ranks of stones, all sizes and shapes; its hull was smashed, its windows, mast and deck shattered. Angela lay sprawled on the remains of the sun deck, quite obviously dead. The fury of the hail hadn't stopped however. The stones beat a tattoo on the remaining structure of the hull, and thrashed at the lifeless bulk of Angela's body, making it bob up and down as though a current were being passed through it. Ray was nowhere to be seen.

I screamed then: and for a moment it seemed there was a lull in the thunder, a brief respite in the attack. Then it began again: wave after wave of pebbles and rocks rising off the beach and flinging themselves at their senseless targets. They would not be content, it seemed, until the "Emmanuelle' was reduced to flotsam and jetsam, and Angela's

body was in small enough pieces to accommodate a shrimp's palate.

The sheep-feeder took hold of my arm in a grip so fierce it stopped the blood flowing to my hand.

"Come on," he said. I heard his voice but did nothing. I was waiting for Ray's face to appear – or to hear his voice calling my name. But there was nothing: just the barrage of the stones. He was dead in the ruins of the boat somewhere – smashed to smithereens.

The sheep-feeder was dragging me now, and I was following him back over the beach.

"The boat' he was saying, “We can get away in my boat -." The idea of escape seemed ludicrous. The island had us on its back, we were its objects utterly.

But I followed, slipping and sliding over the sweaty rocks, ploughing through the tangle of seaweed, back the way we'd come.

On the other side of the island was his poor hope of life. A rowing boat, dragged up on the shingle: an inconsequential walnut shell of a boat.

Would we go to sea in that, like the three men in a sieve? He dragged me, unresisting, towards our deliverance. With every step I became more certain that the beach would suddenly rise up and stone us to death. Maybe make a wall of itself, a tower even, when we were within a single step of safety. It could play any game it liked, any game at all. But then, maybe the dead didn't like games. Games are about gambles, and the dead had already lost. Maybe the dead act only with the arid certainty of mathematicians.

He half threw me into the boat, and began to push it out into the thick tide. No walls of stones rose to prevent our escape. No towers appeared, no slaughtering hail. Even the attack on the "Emmanuelle' had ceased.

Had they sated themselves on three victims? Or was it that the presence of the sheep-feeder, an innocent, a servant of these willful dead, would protect me from their tantrums?

The rowing-boat was off the shingle. We bobbed a little on the backs of a few limp waves until we were deep enough for the oars, and then we were pulling away from the shore and my saviour was sitting opposite me, rowing for all he was worth, a dew of fresh sweat

on his forehead, multiplying with every pull.

The beach receded; we were being set free. The sheep-feeder seemed to relax a little. He gazed down at the swill of dirty water in the bottom of the boat and drew in half a dozen deep breaths; then he looked up at me, his wasted face drained of expression.

"One day, it had to happen -" he said, his voice low and heavy. "Somebody would spoil the way we lived. Break the rhythm."

It was almost soporific, the hauling of the oars, forward and back. I wanted to sleep, to wrap myself up in the tarpaulin I was sitting on, and forget. Behind us, the beach was a distant line. I couldn't see the "Emmanuelle'.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"Back to Tiree," he replied. "We'll see what's to be done there. Find some way to make amends; to help them sleep soundly again."

"Do they eat the sheep?"

"What good is food to the dead? No. No, they have no need of mutton. They take the beasts as a gesture of remembrance."

Remembrance.

I nodded.

"It's our way of mourning them -"

He stopped rowing, too heartsick to finish his explanation, and too exhausted to do anything but let the tide carry us home. A blank moment passed. Then the scratching.

A mouse-noise, no more, a scrabbling at the underside of the boat like a man's nails tickling the planks to be let in. Not one man: many. The sound of their entreaties multiplied, the soft dragging of rotted cuticles across the wood.

In the boat, we didn't move, we didn't speak, we didn't believe. Even as we heard the worst – we didn't believe the worst.

A splash off to starboard; I turned and he was coming towards me, rigid in the water, borne up by unseen puppeteers like a figure-head. It was Ray; his body covered in killing bruises and cuts: stoned to death then brought, like a gleeful mascot, like proof of power, to

spook us. It was almost as though he were walking on water, his feet just hidden by the swell, his arms hanging loosely by his side as he was hauled towards the boat. I looked at his face: lacerated and broken. One eye almost closed, the other smashed from its orbit.

Two yards from the boat, the puppeteers let him sink back into the sea, where he disappeared in a swirl of pink water.

"Your companion?" said the sheep-feeder.

I nodded. He must have fallen into the sea from the stern of the "Emmanuelle'. Now he was like them, a drowned man. They'd already claimed him as their play-thing. So they did like games after all, they hauled him from the beach like children come to fetch a playmate, eager that he should join the horseplay.

The scratching had stopped. Ray's body had disappeared altogether. Not a murmur off the pristine sea, just the slop of the waves against the boards of the boat.

I pulled at the oars "Row!" I screamed at the sheep-feeder. "Row, or they'll kill us."

He seemed resigned to whatever they had in mind to punish us with. He shook his head and spat onto the water. Beneath his floating phlegm something moved in the deep, pale forms rolled and somersaulted, too far down to be clearly seen. Even as I watched they came floating up towards us, their sea-corrupted faces better defined with every fathom they rose, their arms outstretched to embrace us.

A shoal of corpses. The dead in dozens, crab-cleaned and fish-picked, their remaining flesh scarcely sitting on their bones.

The boat rocked gently as their hands reached up to touch it.

The look of resignation on the sheep-feeder's face didn't falter for a moment as the boat was shaken backwards and forwards; at first gently, then so violently we were beaten about like dolls. They meant to capsize us, and there was no help for it. A moment later, the boat tipped over.

The water was icy; far colder than I'd anticipated, and it took the breath away. I'd always been a fairly strong swimmer. My strokes were confident as I began to swim from the boat, cleaving through the white water. The sheep-feeder was less lucky. Like many men who live with the sea, he apparently couldn't swim. Without issuing a cry or a

prayer, he sank like a stone.

What did I hope? That four was enough: that I could be left to thumb a current to safety? Whatever hopes of escape I had, they were short-lived.

I felt a soft, oh so very soft, brushing of my ankles and my feet, almost a caress. Something broke surface briefly close to my head. I glimpsed a grey back, as of a large fish. The touch on my ankle had become a grasp. A pulpy hand, mushed by so long in the water, had hold of me, and inexorably began to claim me for the sea. I gulped what I knew to be my last breath of air, and as I did so Ray's head bobbed no more than a yard from me. I saw his wounds in clinical detail – the water cleansed cuts were ugly flaps of white tissue, with a gleam of bone at their core. The loose eye had been washed away by now, his hair, flattened to his skull, no longer disguised the bald patch at his crown.

The water closed over my head. My eyes were open, and I saw my hard-earned breath flashing past my face in a display of silver bubbles. Ray was beside me, consoling, attentive. His arms floated over his head as though he were surrendering. The pressure of the water distorted his face, puffing his cheeks out, and spilling threads of severed nerves from his empty eye-socket like the tentacles of a tiny squid.

I let it happen. I opened my mouth and felt it fill with cold water. Salt burned my sinuses- the cold stabbed behind my eyes. I felt the brine burning down my throat, a rush of eager water where water shouldn't go – flushing air from my rubes and cavities 'til my system was overwhelmed.

Below me, two corpses, their hair swaying loosely in the current, hugged my legs. Their heads lolled and danced on rotted ropes of neck-muscle, and though I pawed at their hands, and their flesh came off the bone in grey, lace-edged pieces, their loving grip didn't falter. They wanted me, oh how dearly they wanted me.

Ray was holding me too, wrapping me up, pressing his face to mine. There was no purpose in the gesture I suppose. He didn't know or feel, or love or care. And I, losing my life with every second, succumbing to the sea absolutely, couldn't take pleasure in the intimacy that I'd longed for.

Too late for love; the sunlight was already a memory. Was it that

the world was going out – darkening towards the edges as I died – or that we were now so deep the sun couldn't penetrate so far? Panic and terror had left me – my heart seemed not to beat at all – my breath didn't come and go in anguished bursts as it had. A kind of peace was on me.

Now the grip of my companions relaxed, and the gentle tide had its way with me. A rape of the body: a ravaging of skin and muscle, gut, eye, sinus, tongue, brain.

Time had no place here. The days may have passed into weeks, I couldn't know. The keels of boats glided over and maybe we looked up from our rock-hovels on occasion and watched them pass. A ringed finger was trailed in the water, a splashless puddle clove the sky, a fishing line trailed a worm. Signs of life.

Maybe the same hour as I died, or maybe a year later, the current sniffs me out of my rock and has some mercy. I am twitched from amongst the sea-anemones and given to the tide. Ray is with me. His time too has come. The sea-change has occurred; there is no turning back for us.

Relentlessly the tide bears us – sometimes floating, bloated decks for gulls, sometimes half-sunk and nibbled by fish – bears us towards the island. We know the surge of the shingle, and hear, without ears, the rattle of the stones.

The sea has long since washed the plate clean of its leavings. Angela, the "Emmanuelle', and Jonathan, are gone. Only we drowned belong here, face up, under the stones, soothed by the rhythm of tiny waves and the absurd incomprehension of sheep.

XVI: HUMAN REMAINS

Some trades are best practised by daylight, some by night. Gavin was a professional in the latter category. In midwinter, in midsummer, leaning against a wall, or poised in a doorway, a fire-fly cigarette hovering at his lips, he sold what sweated in his jeans to all comers.

Sometimes to visiting widows with more money than love, who'd hire him for a weekend of illicit meetings, sour, insistent kisses and perhaps, if they could forget their dead partners, a dry hump on a lavender-scented bed. Sometimes to lost husbands, hungry for their own sex and desperate for an hour of coupling with a boy who wouldn't ask their name.

Gavin didn't much care which it was. Indifference was a trade-mark of his, even a part of his attraction. And it made leaving him, when the deed was done and the money exchanged, so much simpler. To say, "Ciao', or "Be seeing you', or nothing at all to a face that scarcely cared if you lived or died: that was an easy thing.

And for Gavin, the profession was not unpalatable, as professions went. One night out of four it even offered him a grain of physical pleasure. At worst it was a sexual abattoir, all steaming skins and lifeless eyes. But he'd got used to that over the years.

It was all profit. It kept him in good shoes.

By day he slept mostly, hollowing out a warm furrow in the bed, and mummifying himself in his sheets, head wrapped up in a tangle of arms to keep out the light. About three or so, he'd get up, shave and shower, then spend half an hour in front of the mirror, inspecting himself. He was meticulously self-critical, never allowing his weight to fluctuate more than a pound or two to either side of his self-elected ideal, careful to feed his skin if it was dry, or swab it if it was oily, hunting for any pimple that might flaw his cheek. Strict watch was kept for the smallest sign of venereal disease – the only type of lovesickness he ever suffered. The occasional dose of crabs was easily dispatched, but gonorrhea, which he'd caught twice, would keep him out of service for three weeks, and that was bad for business; so he policed his body obsessively, hurrying to the clinic at the merest sign of a rash.

It seldom happened. Uninvited crabs aside there was little to do in that half-hour of self-appraisal but admire the collision of genes that

had made him. He was wonderful. People told him that all the time. Wonderful. The face, oh the face, they would say, holding him tight as if they could steal a piece of his glamour.

Of course there were other beauties available, through the agencies, even on the streets if you knew where to search. But most of the hustlers Gavin knew had faces that seemed, beside his, unmade. Faces that looked like the first workings of a sculptor rather than the finished article: unrefined, experimental. Whereas he was made, entire. All that could be done had been; it was just a question of preserving the perfection.

Inspection over, Gavin would dress, maybe regard himself for another five minutes, then take the packaged wares out to sell.

He worked the street less and less these days. It was chancy; there was always the law to avoid, and the occasional psycho with an urge to clean up Sodom. If he was feeling really lazy he could pick up a client through the Escort Agency, but they always creamed off a fat portion of the fee.

He had regulars of course, clients who booked his favours month after month. A widow from Fort Lauderdale always hired him for a few days on her annual trip to Europe; another woman whose face he'd seen once in a glossy magazine called him now and then, wanting only to dine with him and confide her marital problems. There was a man Gavin called Rover, after his car, who would buy him once every few weeks for a night of kisses and confessions.

But on nights without a booked client he was out on his own finding a spec and hustling. It was a craft he had off perfectly. Nobody else working the street had caught the vocabulary of invitation better; the subtle blend of encouragement and detachment, of putto and wanton. The particular shift of weight from left foot to right that presented the groin at the best angle: so. Never too blatant: never whorish. Just casually promising.

He prided himself that there was seldom more than a few minutes between tricks, and never as much as an hour. If he made his play with his usual accuracy, eyeing the right disgruntled wife, the right regretful husband, he'd have them feed him (clothe him sometimes), bed him and bid him a satisfied goodnight all before the last tube had run on the Metropolitan Line to Hammersmith. The years of half-hour assignations, three blow- jobs and a fuck in one evening, were over. For one thing he simply didn't have the hunger for it any longer, for

another he was preparing for his career to change course in the coming years: from street hustler to gigolo, from gigolo to kept boy, from kept boy to husband. One of these days, he knew it, he'd marry one of the widows; maybe the matron from Florida. She'd told him how she could picture him spread out beside her pool in Fort Lauderdale, and it was a fantasy he kept warm for her. Perhaps he hadn't got there yet, but he'd turn the trick of it sooner or later. The problem was that these rich blooms needed a lot of tending, and the pity of it was that so many of them perished before they came to fruit.

Still, this year. Oh yes, this year for certain, it had to be this year. Something good was coming with the autumn, he knew it for sure.

Meanwhile he watched the lines deepen around his wonderful mouth (it was, without doubt, wonderful) and calculated the odds against him in the race between time and opportunity.

It was nine-fifteen at night. September 29th, and it was chilly, even in the foyer of the Imperial Hotel. No Indian summer to bless the streets this year: autumn had London in its jaws and was shaking the city bare.

The chill had got to his tooth, his wretched, crumbling tooth. If he'd gone to the dentist's, instead of turning over in his bed and sleeping another hour, he wouldn't be feeling this discomfort. Well, too late now, he'd go tomorrow. Plenty of time tomorrow. No need for an appointment. He'd just smile at the receptionist, she'd melt and tell him she could find a slot for him somewhere, he'd smile again, she'd blush and he'd see the dentist then and there instead of waiting two weeks like the poor nerds who didn't have wonderful faces.

For tonight he'd just have to put up with it. All he needed was one lousy punter – a husband who'd pay through the nose for taking it in the mouth – then he could retire to an all-night club in Soho and content himself with reflections. As long as he didn't find himself with a confession-freak on his hands, he could spit his stuff and be done by half ten. But tonight wasn't his night. There was a new face on the reception desk of the Imperial, a thin, shot-at face with a mismatched rug perched (glued) on his pate, and he'd been squinting at Gavin for almost half an hour.

The usual receptionist, Madox, was a closet-case Gavin had seen prowling the bars once or twice, an easy touch if you could handle that kind. Madox was putty in Gavin's hand; he'd even bought his company for an hour a couple of months back. He'd got a cheap rate

too – that was good politics. But this new man was straight, and vicious, and he was on to Gavin's game.

Idly, Gavin sauntered across to the cigarette machine, his walk catching the beat of the muzack as he trod the maroon carpet. Lousy fucking night.

The receptionist was waiting for him as he turned from the machine, packet of Winston in hand.

"Excuse me… Sir." It was a practised pronunciation that was clearly not natural. Gavin looked sweetly back at him.

"Yes?"

"Are you actually a resident at this hotel… Sir?"

"Actually -”

"If not, the management would be obliged if you'd vacate the premises immediately."

"I'm waiting for somebody."

"Oh?"

The receptionist didn't believe a word of it.

"Well just give me the name -”

"No need."

"Give me the name -”, the man insisted, “and I'll gladly check to see if your… contact… is in the hotel."

The bastard was going to try and push it, which narrowed the options. Either Gavin could choose to play it cool, and leave the foyer, or play the outraged customer and stare the other man down. He chose, more to be bloody-minded than because it was good tactics, to do the latter.

"You don't have any right -” he began to bluster, but the receptionist wasn't moved.

"Look, sonny -” he said, "I know what you're up to, so don't try and get snotty with me or I'll fetch the police." He'd lost control of his elocution: it was getting further south of the river with every syllable.

"We've got a nice clientele here, and they don't want no truck with the likes of you, see?'"Fucker," said Gavin very quietly.

"Well that's one up from a cocksucker, isn't it?"

Touchй.

"Now, sonny – you want to mince out of here under your own steam or be carried out in cuffs by the boys in blue?"

Gavin played his last card.

"Where's Mr. Madox? I want to see Mr. Madox: he knows me."

"I'm sure he does," the receptionist snorted, "I'm bloody sure he does. He was dismissed for improper conduct -" The artificial accent was re-establishing itself' – "So I wouldn't try dropping his name here if I were you. OK? On your way."

Upper hand well and truly secured, the receptionist stood back like a matador and gestured for the bull to go by.

The management thanks you for your patronage. Please don't call again."

Game, set and match to the man with the rug. What the hell; there were other hotels, other foyers, other receptionists. He didn't have to take all this shit.

As Gavin pushed the door open he threw a smiling "Be seeing you' over his shoulder. Perhaps that would make the tick sweat a little one of these nights when he was walking home and he heard a young man's step on the street behind him. It was a petty satisfaction, but it was something.

The door swung closed, sealing the warmth in and Gavin out. It was colder, substantially colder, than it had been when he'd stepped into the foyer. A thin drizzle had begun, which threatened to worsen as he hurried down Park Lane towards South Kensington. There were a couple of hotels on the High Street he could hole up in for a while; if nothing came of that he'd admit defeat.

The traffic surged around Hyde Park Corner, speeding to Knightsbridge or Victoria, purposeful, shining. He pictured himself standing on the concrete island between the two contrary streams of cars, his fingertips thrust into his jeans (they were too tight for him to

get more than the first joint into the pockets), solitary, forlorn.

A wave of unhappiness came up from some buried place in him. He was twenty-four and five months. He had hustled, on and off and on again since he was seventeen, promising himself that he'd find a marriageable widow (the gigolo's pension) or a legitimate occupation before he was twenty-five. But time passed and nothing came of his ambitions. He just lost momentum and gained another line beneath the eye.

And the traffic still came in shining streams, lights signaling this imperative or that, cars full of people with ladders to climb and snakes to wrestle, their passage isolating him from the bank, from safety, with its hunger for destination.

He was not what he'd dreamed he'd be, or promised his secret self.

And youth was yesterday.

Where was he to go now? The flat would feel like a prison tonight, even if he smoked a little dope to take the edge off the room. He wanted, no, he needed to be with somebody tonight. Just to see his beauty through somebody else's eyes. Be told how perfect his proportions were, be wined and dined and flattered stupid, even if it was by Quasimodo's richer, uglier brother. Tonight he needed a fix of affection.

The pick-up was so damned easy it almost made him forget the episode in the foyer of the Imperial. A guy of fifty-five or so, well-heeled: Gucci shoes, a very classy overcoat. In a word: quality.

Gavin was standing in the doorway of a tiny art-house cinema, looking over the times of the Truffaut movie they were showing, when he became aware of the punter staring at him. He glanced at the guy to be certain there was a pick-up in the offing. The direct look seemed to unnerve the punter; he moved on; then he seemed to change his mind, muttered something to himself, and retraced his steps, showing patently false interest in the movie schedule. Obviously not too familiar with this game, Gavin thought; a novice.

Casually Gavin took out a Winston and lit it, the flare of the match in his cupped hands glossing his cheekbones golden. He'd done it a thousand times, as often as not in the mirror for his own pleasure. He had the glance up from the tiny fire off pat: it always did the trick. This time when he met the nervous eyes of the punter, the other didn't back away.

He drew on the cigarette, flicking out the match and letting it drop. He hadn't made a pick-up like this in several months, but he was well satisfied that he still had the knack. The faultless recognition of a potential client, the implicit offer in eyes and lips, that could be construed as innocent friendliness if he'd made an error. This was no error, however, this was the genuine article. The man's eyes were glued to Gavin, so enamoured of him he seemed to be hurting with it. His mouth was open, as though the words of introduction had failed him. Not much of a face, but far from ugly. Tanned too often, and too quickly: maybe he'd lived abroad. He was assuming the man was English: his prevarication suggested it.

Against habit, Gavin made the opening move.

"You like French movies?"

The punter seemed to deflate with relief that the silence between them had been broken.

"Yes," he said.

"You going in?"

The man pulled a face.

"I… I… don't think I will."

"Bit cold "Yes. It is."

"Bit cold for standing around, I mean."

"Oh-yes."

The punter took the bait.

"Maybe… you'd like a drink?"

Gavin smiled.

"Sure, why not?"

"My flat's not far."

"Sure."

"I was getting a bit cheesed off, you know, at home."

"I know the feeling."

Now the other man smiled. "You are…?"

"Gavin."

The man offered his leather-gloved hand. Very formal, business-like. The grip as they shook was strong, no trace of his earlier hesitation remaining.

"I'm Kenneth," he said, "Ken Reynolds."

"Ken."

"Shall we get out of the cold?"

"Suits me."

"I'm only a short walk from here."

A wave of musty, centrally-heated air hit them as Reynolds opened the door of his apartment. Climbing the three flights of stairs had snatched Gavin's breath, but Reynolds wasn't slowed at all. Health freak maybe. Occupation? Something in the city. The handshake, the leather gloves. Maybe Civil Service.

"Come in, come in."

There was money here. Underfoot the pile of the carpet was lush, hushing their steps as they entered. The hallway was almost bare: a calendar hung on the wall, a small table with telephone, a heap of directories, a coat-stand.

"It's warmer in here."

Reynolds was shrugging off his coat and hanging it up. His gloves remained on as he led Gavin a few yards down the hallway and into a large room.

"Let's have your jacket," he said.

"Oh… sure."

Gavin took off his jacket, and Reynolds slipped out into the hall with it. When he came in again he was working off his gloves; a slick of sweat made it a difficult job. The guy was still nervous: even on his home ground. Usually they started to calm down once they were safe

behind locked doors. Not this one: he was a catalogue of fidgets.

"Can I get you a drink?"

"Yeah; that would be good."

"What's your poison?"

"Vodka."

"Surely. Anything with it?"

"Just a drop of water."

"Purist, eh?"

Gavin didn't quite understand the remark.

"Yeah," he said.

"Man after my own heart. Will you give me a moment – I'll just fetch some ice."

"No problem."

Reynolds dropped the gloves on a chair by the door, and left Gavin to the room. It, like the hallway, was almost stiflingly warm, but there was nothing homely or welcoming about it. Whatever his profession, Reynolds was a collector. The room was dominated by displays of antiquities, mounted on the walls, and lined up on shelves. There was very little furniture, and what there was seemed odd: battered tubular frame chairs had no place in an apartment this expensive. Maybe the man was a university don, or a museum governor, something academic. This was no stockbroker's living room. Gavin knew nothing about art, and even less about history, so the displays meant very little to him, but he went to have a closer look, just to show willing. The guy was bound to ask him what he thought of the stuff. The shelves were deadly dull. Bits and pieces of pottery and sculpture: nothing in its entirety, just fragments. On some of the shards there remained a glimpse of design, though age had almost washed the colours out. Some of the sculpture was recognisably human: part of a torso, or foot (all five toes in place), a face that was all but eaten away, no longer male or female. Gavin stifled a yawn. The heat, the exhibits and the thought of sex made him lethargic.

He turned his dulled attention to the wall-hung pieces. They were

more impressive then the stuff on the shelves but they were still far from complete. He couldn't see why anyone would want to look at such broken things; what was the fascination? The stone reliefs mounted on the wall were pitted and eroded, so that the skins of the figures looked leprous, and the Latin inscriptions were almost wiped out. There was nothing beautiful about them: too spoiled for beauty. They made him feel dirty somehow, as though their condition was contagious.

Only one of the exhibits struck him as interesting: a tombstone, or what looked to him to be a tombstone, which was larger than the other reliefs and in slightly better condition. A man on a horse, carrying a sword, loomed over his headless enemy. Under the picture, a few words in Latin. The front legs of the horse had been broken off, and the pillars that bounded the design were badly defaced by age, otherwise the image made sense. There was even a trace of personality in the crudely made face: a long nose, a wide mouth; an individual.

Gavin reached to touch the inscription, but withdrew his ringers as he heard Reynolds enter.

"No, please touch it," said his host. "It's there to take pleasure in. Touch away."

Now that he'd been invited to touch the thing, the desire had melted away. He felt embarrassed; caught in the act.

"Go on," Reynolds insisted.

Gavin touched the carving. Cold stone, gritty under his finger-tips.

"It's Roman," said Reynolds.

Tombstone?"

"Yes. Found near Newcastle. "Who was he?"

"His name was Flavinus. He was a regimental standard-bearer." What Gavin had assumed to be a sword was, on closer inspection, a standard. It ended in an almost erased motif: maybe a bee, a flower, a wheel.

"You an archaeologist, then?"

"That's part of my business. I research sites, occasionally oversee

digs; but most of the time I restore artifacts." "Like these?"

"Roman Britain's my personal obsession." He put down the glasses he was carrying and crossed to the pottery-laden shelves.

This is stuff I've collected over the years. I've never quite got over the thrill of handling objects that haven't seen the light of day for centuries. It's like plugging into history. You know what I mean?" "Yeah."

Reynolds picked a fragment of pottery off the shelf. "Of course all the best finds are claimed by the major collections. But if one's canny, one manages to keep a few pieces back. They were an incredible influence, the Romans. Civil engineers, road-layers, bridge builders."

Reynolds gave a sudden laugh at his burst of enthusiasm. "Oh hell," he said, "Reynolds is lecturing again. Sorry. I get carried away."

Replacing the pottery-shard in its niche on the shelf, he returned to the glasses, and started pouring drinks. With his back to Gavin, he managed to say: "Are you expensive?"

Gavin hesitated. The man's nervousness was catching and the sudden tilt of the conversation from the Romans to the price of a blow-job took some adjustment. "It depends," he flannelled.

"Ah…" said the other, still busying himself with the glasses, “you mean what is the precise nature of my – er – requirement?"

"Yeah."

"Of course."

He turned and handed Gavin a healthy-sized glass of vodka. No ice.

"I won't be demanding of you," he said. "I don't come cheap." "I'm sure you don't," Reynolds tried a smile, but it wouldn't stick to his face, “and I'm prepared to pay you well. Will you be able to stay the night?"

"Do you want me to?"

Reynolds frowned into his glass.

"I suppose I do."

Then yes."

The host's mood seemed to change, suddenly: indecision was replaced by a spun of conviction.

"Cheers," he said, clinking his whisky-filled glass against Gavin's. "To love and life and anything else that's worth paying for."

The double-edged remark didn't escape Gavin: the guy was obviously tied up in knots about what he was doing. I'll drink to that," said Gavin and took a gulp of the vodka. The drinks came fast after that, and just about his third vodka Gavin began to feel mellower than he'd felt in a hell of a long time, content to listen to Reynolds' talk of excavations and the glories of Rome with only one ear. His mind was drifting, an easy feeling. Obviously he was going to be here for the night, or at least until the early hours of the morning, so why not drink the punter's vodka and enjoy the experience for what it offered? Later, probably much later to judge by the way the guy was rambling, there'd be some drink-slurred sex in a darkened room, and that would be that. He'd had customers like this before. They were lonely, perhaps between lovers, and usually simple to please. It wasn't sex this guy was buying, it was company, another body to share his space awhile; easy money.

And then, the noise.

At first Gavin thought the beating sound was in his head, until Reynolds stood up, a twitch at his mouth. The air of well-being had disappeared.

"What's that?" asked Gavin, also getting up, dizzy with drink.

"It's all right -" Reynolds, palms were pressing him down into his chair. "Stay here -"

The sound intensified. A drummer in an oven, beating as he burned.

"Please, please stay here a moment. It's just somebody upstairs."

Reynolds was lying, the racket wasn't coming from upstairs. It was from somewhere else in the flat, a rhythmical thumping, that speeded up and slowed and speeded again. "Help yourself to a drink," said Reynolds at the door, face flushed. "Damn neighbours…"

The summons, for that was surely what it was, was already subsiding.

"A moment only," Reynolds promised, and closed the door behind

him.

Gavin had experienced bad scenes before: tricks whose lovers appeared at inappropriate moments; guys who wanted to beat him up for a price – one who got bitten by guilt in a hotel room and smashed the place to smithereens. These things happened. But Reynolds was different: nothing about him said weird. At the back of his mind, at the very back, Gavin was quietly reminding himself that the other guys hadn't seemed bad at the beginning. Ah hell; he put the doubts away. If he started to get the jitters every time he went with a new face he'd soon stop working altogether. Somewhere along the line he had to trust to luck and his instinct, and his instinct told him that this punter was not given to throwing fits.

Taking a quick swipe from his glass, he refilled it, and waited.

The noise had stopped altogether, and it became increasingly easier to rearrange the facts: maybe it had been an upstairs neighbour after all. Certainly there was no sound of Reynolds moving around in the flat.

His attention wandered around the room looking for something to occupy it awhile, and came back to the tombstone on the wall.

Flavinus the Standard-Bearer.

There was something satisfying about the idea of having your likeness, however crude, carved in stone and put up on the spot where your bones lay, even if some historian was going to separate bones and stone in the fullness of time. Gavin's father had insisted on burial rather than cremation: How else, he'd always said, was he going to be remembered? Who'd ever go to an urn, in a wall, and cry? The irony was that nobody ever went to his grave either: Gavin had been perhaps twice in the years since his father's death. A plain stone bearing a name, a date, and a platitude. He couldn't even remember the year his father died. People remembered Flavinus though; people who'd never known him, or a life like his, knew him now. Gavin stood up and touched the standard-bearer's name, the crudely chased 'FLAVINVS' that was the second word of the inscription. Suddenly, the noise again, more frenzied than ever. Gavin turned away from the tombstone and looked at the door, half-expecting Reynolds to be standing there with a word of explanation. Nobody appeared.

"Damn it."

The noise continued, a tattoo. Somebody, somewhere, was very

angry. And this time there could be no self-deception: the drummer was here, on this floor, a few yards away. Curiosity nibbled Gavin, a coaxing lover. He drained his glass and went out into the hall. The noise stopped as he closed the door behind him.

"Ken?" he ventured. The word seemed to die at his lips.

The hallway was in darkness, except for a wash of light from the far end. Perhaps an open door. Gavin found a switch to his right, but it didn't work.

"Ken?" he said again.

This time the enquiry met with a response. A moan, and the sound of a body rolling, or being rolled, over. Had Reynolds had an accident? Jesus, he could be lying incapacitated within spitting distance from where Gavin stood: he must help. Why were his feet so reluctant to move? He had the tingling in his balls that always came with nervous anticipation; it reminded him of childhood hide-and-seek: the thrill of the chase. It was almost pleasurable.

And pleasure apart, could he really leave now, without knowing what had become of the punter? He had to go down the corridor.

The first door was ajar; he pushed it open and the room beyond was a book-lined bedroom/study. Street lights through the curtainless window fell on a jumbled desk. No Reynolds, no thrasher. More confident now he'd made the first move Gavin explored further down the hallway. The next door – the kitchen -was also open. There was no light from inside. Gavin's hands had begun to sweat: he thought of Reynolds trying to pull his gloves off, though they stuck to his palm. What had he been afraid of? It was more than the pick-up: there was somebody else in the apartment: somebody with a violent temper.

Gavin's stomach turned as his eyes found the smeared handprint on the door; it was blood.

He pushed the door, but it wouldn't open any further. There was something behind it. He slid through the available space, and into the kitchen. An unemptied waste bin, or a neglected vegetable rack, fouled the air. Gavin smoothed the wall with his palm to find the light switch, and the fluorescent tube spasmed into life.

Reynolds' Gucci shoes poked out from behind the door. Gavin pushed it to, and Reynolds rolled out of his hiding place. He'd obviously crawled behind the door to take refuge; there was

something of the beaten animal in his tucked up body. When Gavin touched him he shuddered.

"It's all right… it's me." Gavin prised a bloody hand from Reynolds' face. There was a deep gouge running from his temple to his chin, and another, parallel with it but not as deep, across the middle of his forehead and his nose, as though he'd been raked by a two pronged fork.

Reynolds opened his eyes. It took him a second only to focus on Gavin, before he said: "Go away."

"You're hurt."

"Jesus' sake, go away. Quickly. I've changed my mind… You understand?"

I'll fetch the police."

The man practically spat: "Get the fucking hell out of here, will you? Fucking bum-boy!"

Gavin stood up, trying to make sense out of all this. The guy was in pain, it made him aggressive. Ignore the insults and fetch something to cover the wound. That was it. Cover the wound, and then leave him to his own devices. If he didn't want the police that was his business. Probably he didn't want to explain the presence of a pretty-boy in his hot-house.

"Just let me get you a bandage -"

Gavin went back into the hallway.

Behind the kitchen door Reynolds said: "Don't," but the bum-boy didn't hear him. It wouldn't have made much difference if he had. Gavin liked disobedience. Don't was an invitation.

Reynolds put his back to the kitchen door, and tried to edge his way upright, using the door-handle as purchase. But his head was spinning: a carousel of horrors, round and round, each horse uglier than the last. His legs doubled up under him, and he fell down like the senile fool he was. Damn. Damn. Damn.

Gavin heard Reynolds fall, but he was too busy arming himself to hurry back into the kitchen. If the intruder who'd attacked Reynolds was still in the flat, he wanted to be ready to defend himself. He

rummaged through the reports on the desk in the study and alighted on a paper knife which was lying beside a pile of unopened correspondence. Thanking God for it, he snatched it up. It was light, and the blade was thin and brittle, but properly placed it could surely kill.

Happier now, he went back into the hall and took a moment to work out his tactics. The first thing was to locate the bathroom, hopefully there he'd find a bandage for Reynolds. Even a clean towel would help. Maybe then he could get some sense out of the guy, even coax him into an explanation.

Beyond the kitchen the hallway made a sharp left. Gavin turned the corner, and dead ahead the door was ajar. A light burned inside: water shone on tiles. The bathroom.

Clamping his left hand over the right hand that held the knife, Gavin approached the door. The muscles of his arms had become rigid with fear: would that improve his strike if it was required? He wondered. He felt inept, graceless, slightly stupid.

There was blood on the door-jamb, a palm-print that was clearly Reynolds'. This was where it had happened – Reynolds had thrown out a hand to support himself as he reeled back from his assailant. If the attacker was still in the flat, he must be here. There was nowhere else for him to hide.

Later, if there was a later, he'd probably analyse this situation and call himself a fool for kicking the door open, for encouraging this confrontation. But even as he contemplated the idiocy of the action he was performing it, and the door was swinging open across tiles strewn with water-blood puddles, and any moment there'd be a figure there, hook-handed, screaming defiance. No. Not at all. The assailant wasn't here; and if he wasn't here, he wasn't in the flat.

Gavin exhaled, long and slow. The knife sagged in his hand, denied its pricking. Now, despite the sweat, the terror, he was disappointed. Life had let him down, again – snuck his destiny out of the back door and left him with a mop in his hand not a medal. All he could do was play nurse to the old man and go on his way.

The bathroom was decorated in shades of lime; the blood and tiles clashed. The translucent shower curtain, sporting stylised fish and seaweed, was partially drawn. It looked like the scene of a movie murder: not quite real. Blood too bright: light too flat.

Gavin dropped the knife in the sink, and opened the mirrored cabinet. It was well-stocked with mouth-washes, vitamin supplements, and abandoned toothpaste tubes, but the only medication was a tin of Elastoplasts. As he closed the cabinet door he met his own features in the mirror, a drained face. He turned on the cold tap full, and lowered his head to the sink; a splash of water would clear away the vodka and put some colour in his cheeks.

As he cupped the water to his face, something made a noise behind him. He stood up, his heart knocking against his ribs, and turned off the tap. Water dripped off his chin and his eyelashes, and gurgled down the waste pipe.

The knife was still in the sink, a hand's-length away. The sound was coming from the bath, from in the bath, the inoffensive slosh of water.

Alarm had triggered flows of adrenalin, and his senses distilled the air with new precision. The sharp scent of lemon soap, the brilliance of the turquoise angel-fish flitting through lavender kelp on the shower curtain, the cold droplets on his face, the warmth behind his eyes: all sudden experiences, details his mind had passed over 'til now, too lazy to see and smell and feel to the limits of its reach.

You're living in the real world, his head said (it was a revelation), and if you're not very careful you're going to die there.

Why hadn't he looked in the bath? Asshole. Why not the bath?

"Who's there?" he asked, hoping against hope that Reynolds had an otter that was taking a quiet swim. Ridiculous hope. There was blood here, for Christ's sake.

He turned from the mirror as the lapping subsided – do it! do it! – and slid back the shower curtain on its plastic hooks. In his haste to unveil the mystery he'd left the knife in the sink. Too late now: the turquoise angels concertinaed, and he was looking down into the water.

It was deep, coming up to within an inch or two of the top of the bath, and murky. A brown scum spiraled on the surface, and the smell off it was faintly animal, like the wet fur of a dog. Nothing broke the surface of the water.

Gavin peered in, trying to work out the form at the bottom, his reflection floating amid the scum. He bent closer, unable to puzzle out the relation of shapes in the silt, until he recognised the crudely-

formed fingers of a hand and he realised he was looking at a human form curled up into itself like a fetus, lying absolutely still in the filthy water. He passed his hand over the surface to clear away the muck, his reflection shattered, and the occupant of the bath came clear. It was a statue, carved in the shape of a sleeping figure, only its head, instead of being tucked up tight, was cranked round to stare up out of the blur of sediment towards the surface. Its eyes were painted open, two crude blobs on a roughly carved face; its mouth was a slash, its ears ridiculous handles on its bald head. It was naked: its anatomy no better realised than its features: the work of an apprentice sculptor. In places the paint had been corrupted, perhaps by the soaking, and was lifting off the torso in grey, globular strands. Underneath, a core of dark wood was uncovered.

There was nothing to be frightened of here. An objet d'art in a bath, immersed in water to remove a crass paint-job. The lapping he'd heard behind him had been some bubbles rising from the thing, caused by a chemical reaction. There: the fright was explained. Nothing to panic over. Keep beating my heart, as the barman at the Ambassador used to say when a new beauty appeared on the scene.

Gavin smiled at the irony; this was no Adonis.

"Forget you ever saw it."

Reynolds was at the door. The bleeding had stopped, staunched by an unsavoury rag of a handkerchief pressed to the side of his face. The light of the tiles made his skin bilious: his pallor would have shamed a corpse.

"Are you all right? You don't look it."

I'll be fine… just go, please."

"What happened?"

"I slipped. Water on the floor. I slipped, that's all."

"But the noise…"

Gavin was looking back into the bath. Something about the statue fascinated him. Maybe its nakedness, and that second strip it was slowly performing underwater: the ultimate strip: off with the skin.

"Neighbours, that's all."

"What is this?" Gavin asked, still looking at the unfetching doll-face in the water.

"It's nothing to do with you."

"Why's it all curled up hike that? Is he dying?"

Gavin looked back to Reynolds to see the response to that question, the sourest of smiles, fading. "You'll want money."

"No."

"Damn you! You're in business aren't you? There's notes beside the bed; take whatever you feel you deserve for your wasted time -" He was appraising Gavin." – and your silence."

Again the statue: Gavin couldn't keep his eyes off it, in all its crudity. His own face, puzzled, floated on the skin of the water, shaming the hand of the artist with its proportions.

"Don't wonder," said Reynolds.

"Can't help it."

This is nothing to do with you."

"You stole it… is that right? This is worth a mint and you stole it."

Reynolds pondered the question and seemed, at last, too tired to start lying.

"Yes. I stole it."

"And tonight somebody came back for it -"

Reynolds shrugged.

" – Is that it? Somebody came back for it?"

That's right. I stole it…" Reynolds was saying the lines by rote,"… and somebody came back for it."

That's all I wanted to know."

"Don't come back here, Gavin whoever-you-are. And don't try anything clever, because I won't be here."

"You mean extortion?" said Gavin, "I'm no thief."

Reynolds' look of appraisal rotted into contempt.

Thief or not, be thankful. If it's in you." Reynolds stepped away from the door to let Gavin pass. Gavin didn't move.

Thankful for what?" he demanded. There was an itch of anger in him; he felt, absurdly, rejected, as though he was being foisted off with a half-truth because he wasn't worthy enough to share this secret.

Reynolds had no more strength left for explanation. He was slumped against the door-frame, exhausted.

"Go," he said.

Gavin nodded and left the guy at the door. As he passed from bathroom into hallway a glob of paint must have been loosened from the statue. He heard it break surface, heard the lapping at the edge of the bath, could see, in his head, the way the ripples made the body shimmer.

"Goodnight," said Reynolds, calling after him. Gavin didn't reply, nor did he pick up any money on his way out. Let him have his tombstones and his secrets.

On his way to the front door he stepped into the main room to pick up his jacket. The face of Flavinus the Standard-Bearer looked down at him from the wall. The man must have been a hero, Gavin thought. Only a hero would have been commemorated in such a fashion. He'd get no remembrance like that; no stone face to mark his passage.

He closed the front door behind him, aware once more that his tooth was aching, and as he did so the noise began again, the beating of a fist against a wall.

Or worse, the sudden fury of a woken heart.

The toothache was really biting the following day, and he went to the dentist mid-morning, expecting to coax the girl on the desk into giving him an instant appointment. But his charm was at a low ebb, his eyes weren't sparkling quite as luxuriantly as usual. She told him he'd have to wait until the following Friday, unless it was an emergency. He told her it was: she told him it wasn't. It was going to be a bad day: an aching tooth, a lesbian dentist receptionist, ice on the puddles, nattering women on every street corner, ugly children, ugly

sky.

That was the day the pursuit began.

Gavin had been chased by admirers before, but never quite like this. Never so subtle, so surreptitious. He'd had people follow him round for days, from bar to bar, from street to street, so dog-like it almost drove him mad. Seeing the same longing face night after night, screwing up the courage to buy him a drink, perhaps offering him a watch, cocaine, a week in Tunisia, whatever. He'd rapidly come to loathe that sticky adoration that went bad as quickly as milk, and stank to high Heaven once it had. One of his most ardent admirers, a knighted actor he'd been told, never actually came near him, just followed him around, looking and looking. At first the attention had been flattering, but the pleasure soon became irritation, and eventually he'd cornered the guy in a bar and threatened him with a broken head. He'd been so wound up that night, so sick of being devoured by looks, he'd have done some serious harm if the pitiful bastard hadn't taken the hint. He never saw the guy again; half thought he'd probably gone home and hanged himself. But this pursuit was nowhere near as obvious, it was scarcely more than a feeling. There was no hard evidence that he had somebody on his tail. Just a prickly sense, every time he glanced round, that someone was slotting themselves into the shadows, or that on a night street a walker was keeping pace with him, matching every click of his heel, every hesitation in his step. It was like paranoia, except that he wasn't paranoid. If he was paranoid, he reasoned, somebody would tell him.

Besides, there were incidents. One morning the cat woman who lived on the landing below him idly enquired who his visitor was: the funny one who came in late at night and waited on the stairs hour after hour, watching his room. He'd had no,such visitor: and knew no-one who fitted the description.

Another day, on a busy street, he'd ducked out of the throng into the doorway of an empty shop and was in the act of lighting a cigarette when somebody's reflection, distorted through the grime on the window, caught his eye. The match burned his finger, he looked down as he dropped it, and when he looked up again the crowd had closed round the watcher like an eager sea.

It was a bad, bad feeling: and there was more where that came from.

Gavin had never spoken with Preetorius, though they'd exchanged

an occasional nod on the street, and each asked after the other in the company of mutual acquaintances as though they were dear friends. Preetorius was a black, somewhere between forty-five and assassination, a glorified pimp who claimed to be descended from Napoleon. He'd been running a circle of women, and three or four boys, for the best part of a decade, and doing well from the business. When he first began work, Gavin had been strongly advised to ask for Preetorius' patronage, but he'd always been too much of a maverick to want that kind of help. As a result he'd never been looked upon kindly by Preetorius or his clan. Nevertheless, once he became a fixture on the scene, no-one challenged his right to be his own man. The word was that Preetorius even admitted a grudging admiration for Gavin's greed.

Admiration or no, it was a chilly day in Hell when Preetorius actually broke the silence and spoke to him.

"White boy."

It was towards eleven, and Gavin was on his way from a bar off St Martin's Lane to a club in Covent Garden. The street still buzzed: there were potential punters amongst the theatre and movie-goers, but he hadn't got the appetite for it tonight. He had a hundred in his pocket, which he'd made the day before and hadn't bothered to bank. Plenty to keep him going.

His first thought when he saw Preetorius and his pie-bald goons blocking his path was: they want my money.

"White boy."

Then he recognised the flat, shining face. Preetorius was no street thief; never had been, never would be.

"White boy, I'd like a word with you."

Preetorius took a nut from his pocket, shelled it in his palm, and popped the kernel into his ample mouth.

"You don't mind do you?"

"What do you want?"

"Like I said, just a word. Not too much to ask, is it?"

"OK. What?"

"Not here."

Gavin looked at Preetorius' cohorts. They weren't gorillas, that wasn't the black's style at all, but nor were they ninety-eight pound weaklings. This scene didn't look, on the whole, too healthy.

"Thanks, but no thanks." Gavin said, and began to walk, with as even a pace as he could muster, away from the trio. They followed. He prayed they wouldn't, but they followed. Preetorius talked at his back.

"Listen. I hear bad things about you," he said.

"Oh yes?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm told you attacked one of my boys."

Gavin took six paces before he answered. "Not me. You've got the wrong man."

"He recognised you, trash. You did him some serious mischief."

"I told you: not me."

"You're a lunatic, you know that? You should be put behind fucking bars."

Preetorius was raising his voice. People were crossing the street to avoid the escalating argument.

Without thinking, Gavin turned off St Martin's Lane into Long Acre, and rapidly realised he'd made a tactical error. The crowds thinned substantially here, and it was a long trek through the streets of Convent Garden before he reached another centre of activity. He should have turned right instead of left, and he'd have stepped onto Charing Cross Road. There would have been some safety there. Damn it, he couldn't turn round, not and walk straight into them. All he could do was walk (not run; never run with a mad dog on your heels) and hope he could keep the conversation on an even keel.

Preetorius: "You've cost me a lot of money."

"I don't see -"

"You put some of my prime boy-meat out of commission. It's going to be a long time 'til I get that kid back on the market. He's shit scared, see?"

"Look… I didn't do anything to anybody."

"Why do you fucking lie to me, trash? What have I ever done to you, you treat me like this?"

Preetorius picked up his pace a little and came up level with Gavin, leaving his associates a few steps behind.

"Look…" he whispered to Gavin, “kids like that can be tempting, right? That's cool. I can get into that. You put a little boy-pussy on my plate I'm not going to turn my nose up at it. But you hurt him: and when you hurt one of my kids, I bleed too."

"If I'd done this like you say, you think I'd be walking the street?"

"Maybe you're not a well man, you know? We're not talking about a couple of bruises here, man. I'm talking about you taking a shower in a kid's blood, that's what I'm saying. Hanging him up and cutting him everywhere, then leaving him on my fuckin' stairs wearing a pair of fucking' socks. You getting my message now, white boy? You read my message?"

Genuine rage had flared as Preetorius described the alleged crimes, and Gavin wasn't sure how to handle it. He kept his silence, and walked on.

"That kid idolised you, you know? Thought you were essential reading for an aspirant bum-boy. How'd you like that?"

"Not much."

"You should be fuckin' flattered, man, “cause that's about as much as you'll ever amount to."

Thanks."

"You've had a good career. Pity it's over."

Gavin felt iced lead in his belly: he'd hoped Preetorius was going to be content with a warning. Apparently not. They were here to damage him: Jesus, they were going to hurt him, and for something he hadn't done, didn't even know anything about.

"We're going to take you off the street, white boy. Permanently."

"I did nothing."

"The kid knew you, even with a stocking over your head he knew you. The voice was the same, the clothes were the same. Face it, you were recognised. Now take the consequences."

"Fuck you."

Gavin broke into a run. As an eighteen year old he'd sprinted for his county: he needed that speed again now. Behind him Preetorius laughed (such sport!) and two sets of feet pounded the pavement in pursuit. They were close, closer – and Gavin was badly out of condition. His thighs were aching after a few dozen yards, and his jeans were too tight to run in easily. The chase was lost before it began.

The man didn't tell you to leave," the white goon scolded, his bitten fingers digging into Gavin's biceps.

"Nice try." Preetorius smiled, sauntering towards the dogs and the panting hare. He nodded, almost imperceptibly, to the other goon.

"Christian?" he asked.

At the invitation Christian delivered a fist to Gavin's kidneys. The blow doubled him up, spitting curses.

Christian said: "Over there." Preetorius said: "Make it snappy," and suddenly they were dragging him out of the light into an alley. His shirt and his jacket tore, his expensive shoes were dragged through dirt, before he was pulled upright, groaning. The alley was dark and Preetorius' eyes hung in the air in front of him, dislocated.

"Here we are again," he said. "Happy as can be."

"I… didn't touch him," Gavin gasped.

The unnamed cohort, Not-Christian, put a ham hand in the middle of Gavin's chest, and pushed him back against the end wall of the alley. His heel slid in muck, and though he tried to stay upright his legs had turned to water. His ego too: this was no time to be courageous. He'd beg, he fall down on his knees and lick their soles if need be, anything to stop them doing a job on him. Anything to stop them spoiling his face.

That was Preetorius' favourite pastime, or so the street talk went: the spoiling of beauty. He had a rare way with him, could maim beyond hope of redemption in three strokes of his razor, and have the

victim pocket his lips as a keepsake.

Gavin stumbled forward, palms slapping the wet ground. Something rotten-soft slid out of its skin beneath his hand.

Not-Christian exchanged a grin with Preetorius.

"Doesn't he look delightful?" he said.

Preetorius was crunching a nut. "Seems to me -” he said," -the man's finally found his place in life."

"I didn't touch him," Gavin begged. There was nothing to do but deny and deny: and even then it was a lost cause.

"You're guilty as hell," said Not-Christian.

"Please."

"I'd really like to get this over with as soon as possible," said Preetorius, glancing at his watch, "I've got appointments to keep, people to pleasure."

Gavin looked up at his tormentors. The sodium-lit street was a twenty-five-yard dash away, if he could break through the cordon of their bodies.

"Allow me to rearrange your face for you. A little crime of fashion."

Preetorius had a knife in his hand. Not-Christian had taken a rope from his pocket, with a ball on it. The ball goes in the mouth, the rope goes round the head – you couldn't scream if your life depended on it. This was it.

Go!

Gavin broke from his groveling position like a sprinter from his block, but the slops greased his heels, and threw him off balance. Instead of making a clean dash for safety he stumbled sideways and fell against Christian, who in turn fell back.

There was a breathless scrambling before Preetorius stepped in, dirtying his hands on the white trash, and hauling him to his feet.

"No way out, fucker," he said, pressing the point of the blade against Gavin's chin. The jut of the bone was clearest there, and he began the cut without further debate – tracing the jaw line, too hot for the act to

care if the trash was gagged or not. Gavin howled as blood washed down his neck, but his cries were cut short as somebody's fat fingers grappled with his tongue, and held it fast.

His pulse began to thud in his temples, and windows, one behind the other, opened and opened in front of him, and he was falling through them into unconsciousness. Better to die. Better to die. They'd destroy his face: better to die.

Then he was screaming again, except that he wasn't aware of making the sound in his throat. Through the slush in his ears he tried to focus on the voice, and realised it was Preetorius' scream he was hearing, not his own.

His tongue was released; and he was spontaneously sick. He staggered back, puking, from a mess of struggling figures in front of him: A person, or persons, unknown had stepped in, and prevented the completion of his spoiling. There was a body sprawled on the floor, face up. Not-Christian, eyes open, life shut. God: someone had killed for him. For him.

Gingerly, he put his hand up to his face to feel the damage. The flesh was deeply lacerated along his jawbone, from the middle of his chin to within an inch of his ear. It was bad, but Preetorius, ever organised, had left the best delights to the last, and had been interrupted before he'd slit Gavin's nostrils or taken off his lips. A scar along his jawbone wouldn't be pretty, but it wasn't disastrous.

Somebody was staggering out of the mклйe towards him -Preetorius, tears on his face, eyes like golf-balls.

Beyond him Christian, his arms useless, was staggering towards the street.

Preetorius wasn't following: why?

His mouth opened; an elastic filament of saliva, strung with pearls, depended from his lower lip.

"Help me," he appealed, as though his life was in Gavin's power. One large hand was raised to squeeze a drop of mercy out of the air, but instead came the swoop of another arm, reaching over his shoulder and thrusting a weapon, a crude blade, into the black's mouth. He gargled it a moment, his throat trying to accommodate its edge, its width, before his attacker dragged the blade up and back, holding Preetorius' neck to steady him against the force of the stroke.

The startled face divided, and heat bloomed from Preetorius' interior, warming Gavin in a cloud.

The weapon hit the alley floor, a dull clank. Gavin glanced at it. A short, wide-bladed sword. He looked back at the dead man.

Preetorius stood upright in front of him, supported now only by his executioner's arm. His gushing head fell forward, and the executioner took the bow as a sign, neatly dropping Preetorius' body at Gavin's feet. No longer eclipsed by the corpse, Gavin met his saviour face to face. It took him only a moment to place those crude features: the startled, lifeless eyes, the gash of a mouth, the jug-handle ears. It was Reynolds' statue. It grinned, its teeth too small for its head. Milk-teeth, still to be shed before the adult form. There was, however, some improvement in its appearance, he could see that even in the gloom. The brow seemed to have swelled; the face was altogether better proportioned. It remained a painted doll, but it was a doll with aspirations.

The statue gave a stiff bow, its joints unmistakably creaking, and the absurdity, the sheer absurdity of this situation welled up in Gavin. It bowed, damn it, it smiled, it murdered: and yet it couldn't possibly be alive, could it? Later, he would disbelieve, he promised himself. Later he'd find a thousand reasons not to accept the reality in front of him: blame his blood-starved brain, his confusion, his panic. One way or another he'd argue himself out of this fantastic vision, and it would be as though it had never happened.

If he could just live with it a few minutes longer.

The vision reached across and touched Gavin's jaw, lightly, running its crudely carved fingers along the lips of the wound Preetorius had made. A ring on its smallest finger caught the light: a ring identical to his own.

"We're going to have a scar," it said.

Gavin knew its voice.

"Dear me: pity," it said. It was speaking with his voice. "Still, it could be worse."

His voice. God, his, his, his.

Gavin shook his head.

Yes," it said, understanding that he'd understood.

"Not me."

"Yes."

"Why?"

It transferred its touch from Gavin's jawbone to its own, marking out the place where the wound should be, and even as it made the gesture its surface opened, and it grew a scar on the spot. No blood welled up: it had no blood.

Yet wasn't that his own, even brow it was emulating, and the piercing eyes, weren't they becoming his, and the wonderful mouth?

The boy?" said Gavin, fitting the pieces together.

"Oh the boy…" It threw its unfinished glance to Heaven. "What a treasure he was. And how he snarled. "You washed in his blood?"

"I need it." It knelt to the body of Preetorius and put its fingers in the splithead. "This blood's old, but it'll do. The boy was better."

It daubed Preetorius' blood on its cheek, like war-paint. Gavin couldn't hide his disgust.

"Is he such a loss?" the effigy demanded.

The answer was no, of course. It was no loss at all that Preetorius was dead, no loss that some drugged, cock sucking kid had given up some blood and sleep because this painted miracle needed to feed its growth. There were worse things than this every day, somewhere; huge horrors. And yet "You can't condone me," it prompted, “It's not in your nature is it? Soon it won't be in mine either. I'll reject my life as a tormentor of children, because I'll see through your eyes, share your humanity.

It stood up, its movements still lacking flexibility.

"Meanwhile, I must behave as I think fit."

On its cheek, where Preetorius' blood had been smeared, the skin was already waxier, less like painted wood.

"I am a thing without a proper name," it pronounced. "I am a wound in the flank of the world. But I am also that perfect stranger you

always prayed for as a child, to come and take you, call you beauty, lift you naked out of the street and through Heaven's window. Aren't I? Aren't I?"

How did it know the dreams of his childhood? How could it have guessed that particular emblem, of being hoisted out of a street full of plague into a house that was Heaven?

"Because I am yourself," it said, in reply to the unspoken question, “made perfectible."

Gavin gestured towards the corpses.

"You can't be me. I'd never have done this."

It seemed ungracious to condemn it for its intervention, but the point stood.

"Wouldn't you?" said the other. "I think you would."

Gavin heard Preetorius' voice in his ear. "A crime of fashion." Felt again the knife at his chin, the nausea, the helplessness. Of course he'd have done it, a dozen times over he'd have done it, and called it justice.

It didn't need to hear his accession, it was plain.

"I'll come and see you again," said the painted face. "Meanwhile – if I were you -” it laughed," – I'd be going. "Gavin locked eyes with it a beat, probing it for doubt, then started towards the road.

"Not that way. This!"

It was pointing towards a door in the wall, almost hidden behind festering bags of refuse. That was how it had come so quickly, so quietly.

"Avoid the main streets, and keep yourself out of sight. I'll find you again, when I'm ready."

Gavin needed no further encouragement to leave. Whatever the explanations of the night's events, the deeds were done. Now wasn't the time for questions.

He slipped through the doorway without looking behind him: but he could hear enough to turn his stomach. The thud of fluid on the ground, the pleasurable moan of the miscreant: the sounds were

enough for him to be able to picture its toilet.

Nothing of the night before made any more sense the morning after. There was no sudden insight into the nature of the waking dream he'd dreamt. There was just a series of stark facts.

In the mirror, the fact of the cut on his jaw, gummed up and aching more badly than his rotted tooth.

In the newspapers, the reports of two bodies found in the Covent Garden area, known criminals viciously murdered in what the police described as a 'gangland slaughter'.

In his head, the inescapable knowledge that he would be found out sooner or later. Somebody would surely have seen him with Preetorius, and spill the beans to the police. Maybe even Christian, if he was so inclined, and they'd be there, on his step, with cuffs and warrants. Then what could he tell them, in reply to their accusations? That the man who did it was not a man at all, but an effigy of some kind, that was by degrees becoming a replica of himself? The question was not whether he'd be incarcerated, but which hole they'd lock him in, prison or asylum?

Juggling despair with disbelief, he went to the casualty department to have his face seen to, where he waited patiently for three and a half hours with dozens of similar walking wounded.

The doctor was unsympathetic. There was no use in stitches now, he said, the damage was done: the wound could and would be cleaned and covered, but a bad scar was now unavoidable. Why didn't you come last night, when it happened? the nurse asked. He shrugged: what the hell did they care? Artificial compassion didn't help him an iota.

As he turned the corner with his street, he saw the cars outside the house, the blue light, the cluster of neighbours grinning their gossip. Too late to claim anything of his previous life. By now they had possession of his clothes, his combs, his perfumes, his letters – and they'd be searching through them like apes after lice. He'd seen how thorough-going these bastards could be when it suited them, how completely they could seize and parcel up a man's identity. Eat it up,, suck it up: they could erase you as surely as a shot, but leave you a living blank.

There was nothing to be done. His life was theirs now to sneer at and salivate over: even have a nervous moment, one or two of them,

when they saw his photographs and wondered if perhaps they'd paid for this boy themselves, some horny night.

Let them have it all. They were welcome. From now on he would be lawless, because laws protect possessions and he had none. They'd wiped him clean, or as good as: he had no place to live, nor anything to call his own. He didn't even have fear: that was the strangest thing.

He turned his back on the street and the house he'd lived in for four years, and he felt something akin to relief, happy that his life had been stolen from him in its squalid entirety. He was the lighter for it.

Two hours later, and miles away, he took time to check his pockets. He was carrying a banker's card, almost a hundred pounds in cash, a small collection of photographs, some of his parents and sister, mostly of himself; a watch, a ring, and a gold chain round his neck. Using the card might be dangerous -they'd surely have warned his bank by now. The best thing might be to pawn the ring and the chain, then hitch North. He had friends in Aberdeen who'd hide him awhile.

But first – Reynolds.

It took Gavin an hour to find the house where Ken Reynolds lived. It was the best part of twenty-four hours since he'd eaten and his belly complained as he stood outside Livingstone Mansions. He told it to keep its peace, and slipped into the building. The interior looked less impressive by daylight. The tread of the stair carpet was worn, and the paint on the balustrade filthied with use. Taking his time he climbed the three flights to Reynolds' apartment, and knocked.

Nobody answered, nor was there any sound of movement from inside. Reynolds had told him of course: don't come back – I won't be here. Had he somehow guessed the consequences of sicking that thing into the world?

Gavin rapped on the door again, and this time he was certain he heard somebody breathing on the other side of the door.

"Reynolds…" he said, pressing to the door, "I can hear you."

Nobody replied, but there was somebody in there, he was sure of it. Gavin slapped his palm on the door.

"Come on, open up. Open up, you bastard."

A short silence, then a muffled voice. "Go away."

"I want to speak to you."

"Go away, I told you, go away. I've nothing to say to you."

"You owe me an explanation, for God's sake. If you don't open this fucking door I'll fetch someone who will."

An empty threat, but Reynolds responded: "No! Wait. Wait."

There was the sound of a key in the lock, and the door was opened a few paltry inches. The flat was in darkness beyond the scabby face that peered out at Gavin. It was Reynolds sure enough, but unshaven and wretched. He smelt unwashed, even through the crack in the door, and he was wearing only a stained shirt and a pair of pants, hitched up with a knotted belt.

"I can't help you. Go away."

"If you'll let me explain -" Gavin pressed the door, and Reynolds was either too weak or too befuddled to stop him opening it. He stumbled back into the darkened hallway.

"What the fuck's going on in here?"

The place stank of rotten food. The air was evil with it. Reynolds let Gavin slam the door behind him before producing a knife from the pocket of his stained trousers.

"You don't fool me," Reynolds gleamed, "I know what you've done. Very fine. Very clever."

"You mean the murders? It wasn't me."

Reynolds poked the knife towards Gavin.

"How many blood-baths did it take?" he asked, tears in his eyes. "Six? Ten?"

"I didn't kill anybody."

"… monster."

The knife in Reynolds' hand was the paper knife Gavin himself had wielded. He approached Gavin with it. There was no doubt: he had every intention of using it. Gavin flinched, and Reynolds seemed to take hope from his fear.

"Had you forgotten what it was like, being flesh and blood?"

The man had lost his marbles.

"Look… I just came here to talk."

"You came here to kill me. I could reveal you…so you came to kill me."

"Do you know who I am?" Gavin said.

Reynolds sneered: "You're not the queer boy. You look like him, but you're not."

"For pity's sake… I'm Gavin… Gavin -"

The words to explain, to prevent the knife pressing any closer, wouldn't come.

"Gavin, you remember?" was all he could say.

Reynolds faltered a moment, staring at Gavin's face.

"You're sweating," he said, the dangerous stare fading in his eyes.

Gavin's mouth had gone so dry he could only nod.

"I can see," said Reynolds, "you're sweating."

He dropped the point of the knife.

"It could never sweat," he said, "Never had, never would have, the knack of it. You're the boy… not it. The boy."

His face slackened, its flesh a sack which was almost emptied.

"I need help," said Gavin, his voice hoarse. "You've got to tell me what's going on."

"You want an explanation?" Reynolds replied, "you can have whatever you can find."

He led the way into the main room. The curtains were drawn, but even in the gloom Gavin could see that every antiquity it had contained had been smashed beyond repair. The pottery shards had been reduced to smaller shards, and those shards to dust. The stone reliefs were destroyed, the tombstone of Flavinus the Standard-Bearer

was rubble.

"Who did this?"

"I did," said Reynolds.

"Why?"

Reynolds sluggishly picked his way through the destruction to the window, and peered through a slit in the velvet curtains.

"It'll come back, you see," he said, ignoring the question.

Gavin insisted: "Why destroy it all?"'It's a sickness," Reynolds replied. "Needing to live in the past."

He turned from the window.

"I stole most of these pieces," he said, “over a period of many years. I was put in a position of trust, and I misused it."

He kicked over a sizeable chunk of rubble: dust rose.

"Flavinus lived and died. That's all there is to tell. Knowing his name means nothing, or next to nothing. It doesn't make Flavinus real again: he's dead and happy."

"The statue in the bath?"

Reynolds stopped breathing for a moment, his inner eye meeting the painted face.

"You I thought I was it, didn't you? When I came to the door."

"Yes. I thought it had.finished its business."

"It imitates."

Reynolds nodded. "As far as I understand its nature," he said, “yes, it imitates."

"Where did you find it?"

"Near Carlisle. I was in charge of the excavation there. We found it lying in the bathhouse, a statue curled up into a ball beside the remains of an adult male. It was a riddle. A dead man and a statue, lying together in a bathhouse. Don't ask me what drew me to the

thing, I don't know. Perhaps it works its will through the mind as well as the physique. I stole it, brought it back here."

"And you fed it?"

Reynolds stiffened.

"Don't ask."

"I am asking. You fed it?"

"Yes."

"You intended to bleed me, didn't you? That's why you brought me here: to kill me, and let it wash itself-"

Gavin remembered the noise of the creature's fists on the sides of the bath, that angry demand for food, like a child beating on its cot. He'd been so close to being taken by it, lamb-like.

"Why didn't it attack me the way it did you? Why didn't it just jump out of the bath and feed on me?"

Reynolds wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand.

"It saw your face, of course."

Of course: it saw my face, and wanted it for itself, and it couldn't steal the face of a dead man, so it let me be. The rationale for its behaviour was fascinating, now it was revealed: Gavin felt a taste of Reynolds' passion, unveiling mysteries. "The man in the bathhouse. The one you uncovered -"

"Yes…?"

"He stopped it doing the same thing to him, is that right?"

That's probably why his body was never moved, just sealed up. No-one understood that he'd died fighting a creature that was stealing his life."

The picture was near as damn it complete; just anger remaining to be answered.

This man had come close to murdering him to feed the effigy. Gavin's fury broke surface. He took hold of Reynolds by shirt and skin, and shook him. Was it his bones or teeth that rattled?

"It's almost got my face." He stared into Reynolds' bloodshot eyes. "What happens when it finally has the trick off pat?"

"I don't know."

"You tell me the worst – Tell me!"

"It's all guesswork," Reynolds replied.

"Guess then!"

"When it's perfected its physical imitation, I think it'll steal the one thing it can't imitate: your soul."

Reynolds was past fearing Gavin. His voice had sweetened, as though he was talking to a condemned man. He even smiled.

"Fucker!"

Gavin hauled Reynolds' face yet closer to his. White spittle dotted the old man's cheek.

"You don't care! You don't give a shit, do you?"

He hit Reynolds across the face, once, twice, then again and again, until he was breathless.

The old man took the beating in absolute silence, turning his face up from one blow to receive another, brushing the blood out of his swelling eyes only to have them fill again. Finally, the punches faltered.

Reynolds, on his knees, picked pieces of tooth off his tongue.

"I deserved that," he murmured.

"How do I stop it?" said Gavin.

Reynolds shook his head.

"Impossible," he whispered, plucking at Gavin's hand. "Please," he said, and taking the fist, opened it and kissed the lines.

Gavin left Reynolds in the ruins of Rome, and went into the street. The interview with Reynolds had told him little he hadn't guessed. The only thing he could do now was find this beast that had his beauty, and best it. If he failed, he failed attempting to secure his only

certain attribute: a face that was wonderful. Talk of souls and humanity was for him so much wasted air. He wanted his face.

There was rare purpose in his step as he crossed Kensington. After years of being the victim of circumstance he saw circumstance embodied at last. He would shake sense from it, or die trying.

In his flat Reynolds drew aside the curtain to watch a picture of evening fall on a picture of a city. No night he would live through, no city he'd walk in again. Out of sighs, he let the curtain drop, and picked up the short stabbing sword. The point he put to his chest.

"Come on," he told himself and the sword, and pressed the hilt. But the pain as the blade entered his body a mere half inch was enough to make his head reel: he knew he'd faint before the job was half-done. So he crossed to the wall, steadied the hilt against it, and let his own body-weight impale him. That did the trick. He wasn't sure if the sword had skewered him through entirely, but by the amount of blood he'd surely killed himself. Though he tried to arrange to turn, and so drive the blade all the way home as he fell on it, he fluffed the gesture, and instead fell on his side. The impact made him aware of the sword in his body, a stiff, uncharitable presence transfixing him utterly.

It took him well over ten minutes to die, but in that time, pain apart, he was content. Whatever the flaws of his fifty-seven years, and they were many, he felt he was perishing in a way his beloved Flavinus would not have been ashamed of.

Towards the end it began to rain, and the noise on the roof made him believe God was burying the house, sealing him up forever. And as the moment came, so did a splendid delusion: a hand, carrying a light, and escorted by voices, seemed to break through the wall, ghosts of the future come to excavate his history. He smiled to greet them, and was about to ask what year this was when he realised he was dead.

The creature was far better at avoiding Gavin than he'd been at avoiding it. Three days passed without its pursuer snatching sight of hide or hair of it. But the fact of its presence, close, but never too close, was indisputable. In a bar someone would say: "Saw you last night on the Edgware Road' when he'd not been near the place, or "How'd you make out with that Arab then?" or "Don't you speak to your friends any longer?"

And God, he soon got to like the feeling. The distress gave way to a pleasure he'd not known since the age of two: ease.

So what if someone else was working his patch, dodging the law and the street-wise alike; so what if his friends (what friends? Leeches) were being cut by this supercilious copy; so what if his life had been taken from him and was being worn to its length and its breadth in lieu of him? He could sleep, and know that he, or something so like him it made no difference, was awake in the night and being adored. He began to see the creature not as a monster terrorising him, but as his tool, his public persona almost. It was substance: he shadow.

He woke, dreaming.

It was four-fifteen in the afternoon, and the whine of traffic was loud from the street below. A twilight room; the air breathed and rebreathed and breathed again so it smelt of his lungs. It was over a week since he'd left Reynolds to the ruins, and in that time he'd only ventured out from his new digs (one tiny bedroom, kitchen, bathroom) three times. Sleep was more important now than food or exercise. He had enough dope to keep him happy when sleep wouldn't come, which was seldom, and he'd grown to like the staleness of the air, the flux of light through the curtainless window, the sense of a world elsewhere which he had no part of or place in.

Today he'd told himself he ought to go out and get some fresh air, but he hadn't been able to raise the enthusiasm. Maybe later, much later, when the bars were emptying and he wouldn't be noticed, then he'd slip out of his cocoon and see what could be seen. For now, there were dreams Water.

He'd dreamt water; sitting beside a pool in Fort Lauderdale, a pool full of fish. And the splash of their leaps and dives was continuing, an overflow from sleep. Or was it the other way round? Yes; he had been hearing running water in his sleep and his dreaming mind had made an illustration to accompany the sound. Now awake, the sound continued. It was coming from the adjacent bathroom, no longer running, but lapping. Somebody had obviously broken in while he was asleep, and was now taking a bath. He ran down the short list of possible intruders: the few who knew he was here. There was Paul: a nascent hustler who'd bedded down on the floor two nights before; there was Chink, the dope dealer; and a girl from downstairs he thought was called Michelle. Who was he kidding? None of these people would have broken the lock on the door to get in. He knew very well who it must be. He was just playing a game with himself,

enjoying the process of elimination, before he narrowed the options to one.

Keen for reunion, he slid out from his skin of sheet and duvet. His body turned to a column of gooseflesh as the cold air encased him, his sleep-erection hid its head. As he crossed the room to where his dressing gown hung on the back of the door he caught sight of himself in the mirror, a freeze frame from an atrocity film, a wisp of a man, shrunk by cold, and lit by a rainwater light. His reflection almost flickered, he was so insubstantial.

Wrapping the dressing gown, his only freshly purchased garment, around him, he went to the bathroom door. There was no noise of water now. He pushed the door open.

The warped linoleum was icy beneath his feet; and all he wanted to do was to see his friend, then crawl back into bed. But he owed the tatters of his curiosity more than that: he had questions.

The light through the frosted glass had deteriorated rapidly in the three minutes since he'd woken: the onset of night and a rain-storm congealing the gloom. In front of him the bath was almost filled to overflowing, the water was oil-slick calm, and dark. As before, nothing broke surface. It was lying deep, hidden.

How long was it since he'd approached a lime-green bath in a lime-green bathroom, and peered into the water? It could have been yesterday: his life between then and now had become one long night. He looked down. It was there, tucked up, as before, and asleep, still wearing all its clothes as though it had had no time to undress before it hid itself. Where it had been bald it now sprouted a luxuriant head of hair, and its features were quite complete. No trace of a painted face remained: it had a plastic beauty that was his own absolutely, down to the last mole. Its perfectly finished hands were crossed on its chest. The night deepened. There was nothing to do but watch it sleep, and he became bored with that. It had traced him here, it wasn't likely to run away again, he could go back to bed. Outside the rain had slowed the commuters' homeward journey to a crawl, there were accidents, some fatal; engines overheated, hearts too. He listened to the chase; sleep came and went. It was the middle of the evening when thirst woke him again: he was dreaming water, and there was the sound as it had been before. The creature was hauling itself out of the bath, was putting its hand to the door, opening it.

There it stood. The only light in the bedroom was coming from the

street below; it barely began to illuminate the visitor.

"Gavin? Are you awake?"

"Yes," he said.

"Will you help me?" it asked. There was no trace of threat in its voice, it asked as a man might ask his brother, for kinship's sake.

"What do you want?"

"Time to heal."

"Heal?"

"Put on the light."

Gavin switched on the lamp beside the bed and looked at the figure at the door. It no longer had its arms crossed on its chest, and Gavin saw that the position had been covering an appalling shotgun wound. The flesh of its chest had been blown open, exposing its colourless innards. There was, of course, no blood: that it would never have. Nor, from this distance, could Gavin see anything in its interior that faintly resembled human anatomy.

"God Almighty," he said.

"Preetorius had friends," said the other, and its ringers touched the edge of the wound. The gesture recalled a-picture of the wall of his mother's house. Christ in Glory – the Sacred Heart floating inside the Saviour – while his fingers, pointing to the agony he'd suffered, said: This was for you."

"Why aren't you dead?"

"Because I'm not yet alive," it said.

Not yet: remember that, Gavin thought. It has intimations of mortality.

"Are you in pain?"

"No," it said sadly, as though it craved the experience, "I feel nothing. All the signs of life are cosmetic. But I'm learning." It smiled. "I've got the knack of the yawn, and the fart." The idea was both absurd and touching; that it would aspire to farting, that a farcical failure in the digestive system was for it a precious sign of humanity.

"And the wound?"

" – is healing. Will heal completely in time."

Gavin said nothing.

"Do I disgust you?" it asked, without inflection.

"No."

It was staring at Gavin with perfect eyes, his perfect eyes.

"What did Reynolds tell you?" it asked.

Gavin shrugged.

"Very little."

That I'm a monster? That I suck out the human spirit?"

"Not exactly."

"More or less."

"More or less," Gavin conceded.

It nodded. "He's right," it said. "In his way, he's right. I need blood: that makes me monstrous. In my youth, a month ago, I bathed in it. Its touch gave wood the appearance of flesh. But I don't need it now: the process is almost finished. All I need now…

It faltered; not, Gavin thought, because it intended to lie, but because the words to describe its condition wouldn't come.

"What do you need?" Gavin pressed it.

It shook its head, looking down at the carpet. "I've lived several times, you know. Sometimes I've stolen lives and got away with it. Lived a natural span, then shrugged off that face and found another. Sometimes, like the last time, I've been challenged, and lost -"

"Are you some kind of machine?"

"No."

"What then?"

"I am what I am. I know of no others like me; though why should I

be the only one? Perhaps there are others, many others: I simply don't know of them yet. So I live and die and live again, and learn nothing -" the word was bitterly pronounced," – of myself. Understand? You know what you are because you see others like you. If you were alone on earth, what would you know? What the mirror told you, that's all. The rest would be myth and conjecture. "The summary was made without sentiment.

"May I lie down?" it asked.

It began to walk towards him, and Gavin could see more clearly the fluttering in its chest-cavity, the restless, incoherent forms that were mushrooming there in place of the heart. Signing, it sank face-down on the bed, its clothes sodden, and closed its eyes.

"We'll heal," it said. "Just give us time."

Gavin went to the door of the flat and bolted it. Then he dragged a table over and wedged it under the handle. Nobody could get in and attack it in sleep: they would stay here together in safety, he and it, he and himself. The fortress secured, he brewed some coffee and sat in the chair across the room from the bed and watched the creature sleep.

The rain rushed against the window heavily one hour, lightly the next. Wind threw sodden leaves against the glass and they clung there like inquisitive moths; he watched them sometimes, when he tired of watching himself, but before long he'd want to look again, and he'd be back staring at the casual beauty of his outstretched arm, the light flicking the wrist-bone, the lashes. He fell asleep in the chair about midnight, with an ambulance complaining in the street outside, and the rain coming again.

It wasn't comfortable in the chair, and he'd surface from sleep every few minutes, his eyes opening a fraction. The creature was up: it was standing by the window, now in front of the mirror, now in the kitchen. Water ran: he dreamt water. The creature undressed: he dreamt sex. It stood over him, its chest whole, and he was reassured by its presence: he dreamt, it was for a moment only, himself lifted out of a street through a window into Heaven. It dressed in his clothes: he murmured his assent to the theft in his sleep. It was whistling: and there was a threat of day through the window, but he was too dozy to stir just yet, and quite content to have the whistling young man in his clothes live for him.

At last it leaned over the chair and kissed him on the lips, a brother's kiss, and left. He heard the door close behind it.

After that there were days, he wasn't sure how many, when he stayed in the room, and did nothing but drink water. This thirst had become unquenchable. Drinking and sleeping, drinking and sleeping, twin moons. The bed he slept on was damp at the beginning from where the creature had laid, and he had no wish to change the sheets. On the contrary he enjoyed the wet linen, which his body dried out too soon. When it did he took a bath himself in the water the thing had lain in and returned to the bed dripping wet, his skin crawling with cold, and the scent of mildew all around. Later, too indifferent to move, he allowed his bladder free rein while he lay on the bed, and that water in time became cold, until he dried it with his dwindling body-heat.

But for some reason, despite the icy room, his nakedness, his hunger, he couldn't die.

He got up in the middle of the night of the sixth or seventh day, and sat on the edge of the bed to find the flaw in his resolve. When the solution didn't come he began to shamble around the room much as the creature had a week earlier, standing in front of the mirror to survey his pitifully changed body, watching the snow shimmer down and melt on the sill.

Eventually, by chance, he found a picture of his parents he remembered the creature staring at. Or had he dreamt that? He thought not: he had a distinct idea that it had picked up this picture and looked at it.

That was, of course, the bar to his suicide: that picture. There were respects to be paid. Until then how could he hope to die?

He walked to the Cemetery through the slush wearing only a pair of slacks and a tee-shirt. The remarks of middle-aged women and school-children went unheard. Whose business but his own was it if going barefoot was the death of him? The rain came and went, sometimes thickening towards snow, but never quite achieving its ambition.

There was a service going on at the church itself, a line of brittle coloured cars parked at the front. He slipped down the side into the churchyard. It boasted a good view, much spoiled today by the smoky veil of sleet, but he could see the trains and the high-rise flats; the endless rows of roofs. He ambled amongst the headstones, by no

means certain of where to find his father's grave. It had been sixteen years: and the day hadn't been that memorable. Nobody had said anything illuminating about death in general, or his father's death specifically, there wasn't even a social gaff or two to mark the day: no aunt broke wind at the buffet table, no cousin took him aside to expose herself. He wondered if the rest of the family ever came here: whether indeed they were still in the country. His sister had always threatened to move out: go to New Zealand, begin again. His mother was probably getting through her fourth husband by now, poor sod, though perhaps she was the pitiable one, with her endless chatter barely concealing the panic.

Here was the stone. And yes, there were fresh flowers in the marble urn that rested amongst the green marble chips. The old bugger had not lain here enjoying the view unnoticed. Obviously somebody, he guessed his sister, had come here seeking a little comfort from Father. Gavin ran his fingers over the name, the date, the platitude. Nothing exceptional: which was only right and proper, because there'd been nothing exceptional about him. Staring at the stone, words came spilling out, as though Father was sitting on the edge of the grave, dangling his feet, raking his hair across his gleaming scalp, pretending, as he always pretended, to care.

"What do you think, eh?" Father wasn't impressed. "Not much, am I?" Gavin confessed. You said it, son.

"Well I was always careful, like you told me. There aren't any bastards out there, going to come looking for me." Damn pleased.

"I wouldn't be much to find, would I?" Father blew his nose, wiped it three times. Once from left to right, again left to right, finishing right to left. Never failed. Then he slipped away. "Old shithouse."

A toy train let out a long blast on its horn as it passed and Gavin looked up. There he was – himself – standing absolutely still a few yards away. He was wearing the same clothes he'd put on a week ago when he'd left the flat. They looked creased and shabby from constant wear. But the flesh! Oh, the flesh was more radiant than his own had ever been. It almost shone in the drizzling light; and the tears on the doppelganger's cheeks only made the features more exquisite. "What's wrong?" said Gavin.

"It always makes me cry, coming here." It stepped over the graves towards him, its feet crunching on gravel, soft on grass. So real. "You've been here before?"

"Oh yes. Many times, over the years -"

Over the years? What did it mean, over the years? Had it mourned here for people it had killed?

As if in answer: "I come to visit Father. Twice, maybe three times a year."

This isn't your father," said Gavin, almost amused by the delusion. "It's mine."

"I don't see any tears on your face," said the other.

"I feel…"

"Nothing," his face told him. "You feel nothing at all, if you're honest."

That was the truth.

"Whereas I…" the tears began to flow again, its nose ran, "I will miss him until I die."

It was surely playacting, but if so why was there such grief in its eyes: and why were its features crumpled into ugliness as it wept. Gavin had seldom given in to tears: they'd always made him feel weak and ridiculous. But this thing was proud of tears, it gloried in them. They were its triumph.

And even then, knowing it had overtaken him, Gavin could find nothing in him that approximated grief.

"Have it," he said. "Have the snots. You're welcome."

The creature was hardly listening.

"Why is it all so painful?" it asked, after a pause. "Why is it loss that makes me human?"

Gavin shrugged. What did he know or care about the fine art of being human? The creature wiped its nose with its sleeve, sniffed, and tried to smile through its unhappiness.

"I'm sorry," it said, "I'm making a damn fool of myself. Please forgive me."

It inhaled deeply, trying to compose itself.

That's all right," said Gavin. The display embarrassed him, and he was glad to be leaving.

"Your flowers?" he asked as he turned from the grave.

It nodded.

"He hated flowers."

The thing flinched.

"Ah."

"Still, what does he know?"

He didn't even look at the effigy again; just turned and started up the path that ran beside the church. A few yards on, the thing called after him: "Can you recommend a dentist?"

Gavin grinned, and kept walking.

It was almost the commuter hour. The arterial road that ran by the church was already thick with speeding traffic: perhaps it was Friday, early escapees hurrying home. Lights blazed brilliantly, horns blared.

Gavin stepped into the middle of the flow without looking to right or left, ignoring the squeals of brakes, and the curses, and began to walk amongst the traffic as if he were idling in an open field.

The wing of a speeding car grazed his leg as it passed, another almost collided with him. Their eagerness to get somewhere, to arrive at a place they would presently be itching to depart from again, was comical. Let them rage at him, loathe him, let them glimpse his featureless face and go home haunted. If the circumstances were right, maybe one of them would panic, swerve, and run him down. Whatever. From now on he belonged to chance, whose Standard-Bearer he would surely be.

XVII: THE INHUMAN CONDITION

"Are you the one then?" Red demanded, seizing hold of the derelict by the shoulder of his squalid gabardine. "What one d'you mean?" the dirt-caked face replied. He was scanning the quartet of young men who'd cornered him with rodent's eyes. The tunnel where they'd found him relieving himself was far from hope of help. They all knew it and so, it seemed, did he. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've been showing yourself to children," Red said.

The man shook his head, a dribble of spittle running from his lip into the matted bush of his beard. "I've done nothing," he insisted.

Brendan sauntered across to the man, heavy footsteps hollow in the tunnel. "What's your name?" he inquired, with deceptive courtesy. Though he lacked Red's height and commanding manner, the scar that inscribed Brendan's cheek from temple to jaw line suggested he knew suffering, both in the giving and the receiving. "Name," he demanded. "I'm not going to ask you again."

"Pope," the old man muttered. "Mr. Pope."

Brendan grinned. "Mr. Pope?" he said. "Well, we heard you've been exposing that rancid little prick of yours to innocent children. What do you say to that?"

"No," Pope replied, again shaking his head. "That's not true. I never done nothing like that." When he frowned the filth on his face cracked like crazy paving, a second skin of grime which was the accrual of many months. Had it not been for the fragrance of alcohol off him, which obscured the worst of his bodily stench, it would have been nigh on impossible to stand within a yard of him. The man was human refuse, a shame to his species.

"Why bother with him?" Karney said. "He stinks."

Red glanced over his shoulder to silence the interruption. At seventeen, Karney was the youngest, and in the quartet's unspoken hierarchy scarcely deserving of an opinion. Recognizing his error, he shut up, leaving Red to return his attention to the vagrant. He pushed Pope back against the wall of the tunnel. The old man expelled a cry as he struck the concrete; it echoed back and forth. Karney, knowing from past experience how the scene would go from here, moved away

and studied a gilded cloud of gnats on the edge of the tunnel. Though he enjoyed being with Red and the other two-the camaraderie, the petty larceny, the drinking-this particular game had never been much to his taste. He couldn't see the sport in finding some drunken wreck of a man like Pope and beating what little sense was left in his deranged head out of him. It made Karney feel dirty, and he wanted no part of it. Red pulled Pope off the wall and spat a stream of abuse into the man's face, then, when he failed to get an adequate response, threw him back against the tunnel a second time, more forcibly than the first, following through by taking the breathless man by both lapels and shaking him until he rattled. Pope threw a panicky glance up and down the track. A railway had once run along this route through Highgate and Finsbury Park. The track was long gone, however, and the site was public parkland, popular with early morning joggers and late-evening lovers Now, in the middle of a clammy afternoon, the track was deserted in both directions.

"Hey," said Catso, "don't break his bottles."

"Right," said Brendan, "we should dig out the drink before we break his head."

At the mention of being robbed of his liquor Pope began to struggle, but his thrashing only served to enrage his captor. Red was in a dirty mood. The day, like most days this Indian summer, had been sticky and dull. Only the dog-end of a wasted season to endure; nothing to do, and no money to spend. Some entertainment had been called for, and it had fallen to Red as lion, and Pope as Christian, to supply it.

"You'll get hurt if you struggle," Red advised the man, "we only want to see what you've got in your pockets." "None of your business," Pope retorted, and for a moment he spoke as a man who had once been used to being obeyed. The outburst made Karney turn from the gnats and gaze at Pope's emaciated face. Nameless degeneracies had drained it of dignity or vigor, but something remained there, glimmering beneath the dirt. What had the man been, Karney wondered? A banker perhaps? A judge, now lost to the law forever?

Catso had now stepped into the fray to search Pope's clothes, while Red held his prisoner against the tunnel wall by the throat. Pope fought off Catso's unwelcome attentions as best he could, his arms flailing like windmills, his eyes getting progressively wilder. Don't fight, Karney willed him, it'll be worse for you if you do. But the old man seemed to be on the verge of panic. He was letting out small grunts of protest that were more animal than human. "Somebody hold

his arms," Catso said, ducking beneath Pope's attack. Brendan grabbed hold of Pope's wrists and wrenched the man's arms up above his head to facilitate an easier search. Even now, with any hope of release dashed, Pope continued to squirm. He managed to land a solid kick to Red's left shin, for which he received a blow in return. Blood broke from his nose and ran down into his mouth. There was more color where that came from, Karney knew. He'd seen pictures aplenty of spilled people-bright, gleaming coils of guts; yellow fat and purple lungs-all that brilliance was locked up in the gray sack of Pope's body. Why such a thought should occur to him Karney wasn't certain. It distressed him, and he tried to turn his attention back to the gnats, but Pope demanded his attention, loosing a cry of anguish as Catso ripped open one of his several waistcoats to get to the lower layers. "Bastards!" Pope screeched, not seeming to care that his insults would inevitably earn him further blows. "Take your shifting hands off me or I'll have you dead. All of you I' Red's fist brought an end to the threats, and blood came running after blood. Pope spat it back at his tormentor. "Don't tempt me,"

Pope said, his voice dropping to a murmur. "I warn you…"

"You smell like a dead dog," Brendan said. "Is that what you are: a dead dog?"

Pope didn't grant him a reply. His eyes were on Catso, who was systematically emptying the coat and waistcoat pockets and tossing a pathetic collection of keepsakes into the dust on the tunnel floor.

"Karney," Red snapped, “Look through the stuff, will you? See if there's anything worth having." Karney stared at the plastic trinkets and the soiled ribbons, at the tattered sheets of paper (was the man a poet?) and the wine-bottle corks. "It's all trash," he said.

"Look anyway," Red instructed. "Could be money wrapped in that stuff." Karney made no move to comply. "Look, damn you.

Reluctantly, Karney went down on his haunches and proceeded to sift through the mound of rubbish Catso was still depositing in the dirt. He could see at a glance that there was nothing of value there, though perhaps some of the items-the battered photographs, the all but indecipherable notes-might offer some clue to the man Pope had been before drink and incipient lunacy had driven the memories away. Curious as he was, Karney wished to respect Pope's privacy. It was all the man had left.

"There's nothing here," he announced after a cursory examination. But Catso hadn't finished his search. The deeper he dug the more layers of filthy clothing presented themselves to his eager hands. Pope had more pockets than a master magician.

Karney glanced up from the forlorn heap of belongings and found, to his discomfort, that Pope's eyes were on him. The old man, exhausted and beaten, had given up his protests. He looked pitiful. Karney opened his hands to signify that he had taken nothing from the heap. Pope, by way of reply, offered a tiny nod.

"Got it!" Catso yelled triumphantly. "Got the fucker!" and pulled a bottle of vodka from one of the pockets. Pope was either too feeble to notice that his alcohol supply had been snatched or too tired to care. Whichever way, he made no sound of complaint as the liquor was stolen from him.

"Any more?" Brendan wanted to know. He'd begun to giggle, a high-pitched laugh that signaled his escalating excitement. "Maybe the dog's got more where that came from," he said, letting Pope's hands fall and pushing Catso aside. The latter made no objection to the treatment. He had his bottle and was satisfied. He smashed off the neck to avoid contamination and began to drink, squatting in the dirt. Red relinquished his grip on Pope now that Brendan had taken charge. He was clearly bored with the game. Brendan, on the other hand, was just beginning to get a taste for it.

Red walked over to Karney and turned over the pile of Pope's belongings with the toe of his boot. "Fucking wash-out," he stated, without feeling.

"Yeah," Karney said, hoping that Red's disaffection would signal an end to the old man's humiliation. But Red had thrown the bone to Brendan, and he knew better than to try and snatch it back. Karney had seen Brendan's capacity for violence before and he had no desire to watch the man at work again. Sighing, he stood up and turned his back on Brendan's activities. The echoes off the tunnel's wall were all too eloquent however, a mingling of punches and breathless obscenities. On past evidence nothing would stop Brendan until his fury was spent. Anyone foolish enough to interrupt him would find themselves victims in their turn.

Red had sauntered across to the far side of the tunnel, lit a cigarette, and was watching the punishment meted out with casual interest. Karney glanced around at Catso. He had descended from squatting to

sitting in the dirt, the bottle of vodka between his outstretched legs. He was grinning to himself, deaf to the drool of pleas falling from Pope's broken mouth.

Karney felt sick to his stomach. More to divert his attention from the beating than out of genuine interest, he returned to the junk filched from Pope's pockets and turned it over, picking up one of the photographs to examine. It was of a child, though it was impossible to make any guess as to family resemblance. Pope's face was now barely recognizable; one eye had already begun to close as the bruise around it swelled. Karney tossed the photograph back with the rest of the mementoes. As he did so he caught sight of a length of knotted cord which he had previously passed over. He glanced back up at Pope. The puffed eye was closed, the other seemed sightless. Satisfied that he wasn't being watched, Karney pulled the string from where it lay, coiled like a snake in its nest, among the trash. Knots fascinated him and always had. Though he had never possessed skill with academic puzzles (mathematics was a mystery to him; the intricacies of language the same) he had always had a taste for more tangible riddles. Given a knot, a jigsaw or a railway timetable, he was happily lost to himself for hours. The interest went back to his childhood, which had been solitary. With neither father nor siblings to engage his attention what better companion than a puzzle?

He turned the string over and over, examining the three knots set at inch intervals in the middle of its length. They were large and asymmetrical and seemed to serve no discernible purpose except, perhaps, to infatuate minds like his own. How else to explain their cunning construction except that the knotter had been at pains to create a problem that was well nigh insoluble? He let his fingers play over the surfaces of the knots, instinctively seeking some latitude, but they had been so brilliantly contrived that no needle, however fine, could have been pushed between the intersected strands. The challenge they presented was too appealing to ignore. Again he glanced up at the old man. Brendan had apparently tired of his labors. As Karney looked on he threw the old man against the tunnel wall and let the body sink to the ground. Once there, he let it lie. An unmistakable sewer stench rose from it. "That was good," Brendan pronounced like a man who had stepped from an invigorating shower. The exercise had raised a sheen of sweat on his ruddy features; he was smiling from ear to ear. "Give me some of that vodka, Catso." "All gone," Catso slurred, upending the bottle. "Wasn't more than a throatful in it."

"You're a lying shit," Brendan told him, still grinning.

"What if I am?" Catso replied, and tossed the empty bottle away. It smashed. "Help me up," he requested of Brendan. The latter, his great good humor intact, helped Catso to his feet. Red had already started to walk out of the tunnel; the others followed.

"Hey Karney," Catso said over his shoulder, “you coming?"

"Sure."

"You want to kiss the dog better?" Brendan suggested. Catso was almost sick with laughter at the remark. Karney made no answer. He stood up, his eyes glued to the inert figure slumped on the tunnel floor, watching for a flicker of consciousness. There was none that he could see. He glanced after the others. All three had their backs to him as they made their way down the track. Swiftly, Karney pocketed the knots. The theft took moments only. Once the cord was safely out of sight he felt a surge of triumph which was out of all proportion to the goods he'd gained. He was already anticipating the hours of amusement the knots would furnish. Time when he could forget himself, and his emptiness; forget the sterile summer and the loveless winter ahead; forget too the old man lying in his own waste yards from where he stood.

"Karney!" Catso called.

Karney turned his back on Pope and began to walk away from the body and the attendant litter of belongings. A few paces from the edge of the tunnel the old man behind him began to mutter in his delirium. The words were incomprehensible. But by some acoustic trick, the walls of the tunnel multiplied the sound. Pope's voice was thrown back and forth and back again, filling the tunnel with whispers.

It wasn't until much later that night, when he was sitting alone in his bedroom with his mother weeping in her sleep next door, that Karney had the opportunity to study the knots at leisure. He had said nothing to Red or the others about his stealing the cord. The theft was so minor they would have mocked him for mentioning it. And besides, the knots offered him a personal challenge, one which he would face- and conceivably fail-in private. After some debate with himself he elected the knot he would first attempt and began to work at it. Almost immediately he lost all sense of time passing; the problem engrossed him utterly. Hours of blissful frustration passed unnoticed as he analyzed the tangle, looking for some clue as to a hidden system in the knotting. He could find none. The configurations, if they had some rationale, were beyond him. All he could hope to do was tackle

the problem by trial and error. Dawn was threatening to bring the world to light again when he finally relinquished the cord to snatch a few hours of sleep, and in a night's work he had merely managed to loosen a tiny fraction of the knot.

Over the next four days the problem became an idйe fixe, a hermetic obsession to which he would return at any available opportunity, picking at the knot with fingers that were increasingly numb with use. The puzzle enthralled him as little in his adult life ever had. Working at the knot he was deaf and blind to the outside world. Sitting in his lamp-lit room by night, or in the park by day, he could almost feel himself drawn into its snarled heart, his consciousness focused so minutely it could go where light could not. But despite his persistence, the unraveling proved a slow business. Unlike most knots he had encountered, which, once loosened in part, conceded the entire solution, this structure was so adroitly designed that prising one element loose only served to constrict and tighten another. The trick, he began to grasp, was to work on all sides of the knot at an equal rate, loosening one part a fraction then moving around to loosen another to an equal degree, and so on. This systematic rotation, though tedious, gradually showed results.

He saw nothing of Red, Brendan or Catso in this time. Their silence suggested that they mourned his absence as little as he mourned theirs. He was surprised, therefore, when Catso turned up looking for him on Friday evening. He had come with a proposal. He and Brendan had found a house ripe for robbery and wanted Karney as lookout man. He had fulfilled that role twice in the past. Both had been small breaking and entering jobs like this, which on the first occasion had netted a number of salable items of jewelry, and on the second several hundred pounds in cash. This time, however, the job was to be done without Red's involvement. He was increasingly taken up with Anelisa, and she, according to Catso, had made him swear off petty theft and save his talents for something more ambitious. Karney sensed that Catso-and Brendan too, most likely-was itching to prove his criminal proficiency without Red. The house they had chosen was an easy target, so Catso claimed, and Karney would be a damn fool to let a chance of such easy pickings pass by. He nodded along with Catso's enthusiasm, his mind on other pickings. When Catso finally finished his spiel Karney agreed to the job, not for the money, but because saying yes would get him back to the knot soonest.

Much later that evening, at Catso's suggestion, they met to look at the site of the proposed job. The location certainly suggested an easy take. Karney had often walked over the bridge that carried Hornsey

Lane across the Archway Road, but he had never noticed the steep footpath-part steps, part track-that ran from the side of the bridge down to the road below. Its entrance was narrow and easily overlooked, and its meandering length was lit by only one lamp, which light was obscured by trees growing in the gardens that backed on to the pathway. It was these gardens-their back fences easily scaled or wrenched down-that offered such perfect access to the houses. A thief, using the secluded footpath, might come and go with impunity, unseen by travelers on either the road above or that below. All the setup required was a lookout on the pathway to warn of the occasional pedestrian who might use the footpath. This would be Karney's duty.

The following night was a thief's joy. Cool, but not cold; cloudy, but without rain. They met on Highgate Hill, at the gates of the Church of the Passionist Fathers, and from there made their way down to the Archway Road. Approaching the pathway from the top end would, Brendan had argued, attract more attention. Police patrols were more common on Hornsey Lane, in part because the bridge was irresistible to local depressives. For the committed suicide the venue had distinct advantages, its chief appeal being that if the eighty-foot drop didn't kill you the juggernauts hurtling south on the Archway Road certainly would.

Brendan was on another high tonight, pleased to be leading the others instead of taking second place to Red. His talk was an excitable babble, mostly about women. Karney let Catso have pride of place beside Brendan and hung back a few paces, his hand in his jacket pocket, where the knots were waiting. In the last few hours, fatigued by so many sleepless nights, the cord had begun to play tricks on Karney's eyes. On occasion it had even seemed to move in his hand, as though it were working itself loose from the inside. Even now, as they approached the pathway, he could seem to feel it shift against his palm.

"Hey man… look at that." Catso was pointing up the pathway; its full length was in darkness. "Someone killed the lamp."

"Keep your voice down," Brendan told him and led the way up the path. It was not in total darkness. A vestige of illumination was thrown up from the Archway Road. But filtered as it was through a dense mass of shrubbery, the path was still virtually benighted. Karney could scarcely see his hands in front of his face. But the darkness would presumably dissuade all but the most sure-footed of pedestrians from using the path. When they climbed a little more than

halfway up, Brendan brought the tiny party to a halt.

"This is the house," he announced.

"Are you sure?" Catso said.

"I counted the gardens. This is the one."

The fence that bounded the bottom of the garden was in an advanced state of disrepair. It took only a brief manhandling from Brendan-the sound masked by the roar of a late-night juggernaut on the tarmac below-to afford them easy access. Brendan pushed through the thicket of brambles growing wild at the end of the garden and Catso followed, cursing as he was scratched. Brendan silenced him with a second curse, then turned back to Karney. "We're going in. We'll whistle twice when we're out of the house. You remember the signals?" "He's not an imbecile. Are you Karney? He'll be all right. Now are we going or not?" Brendan said no more. The two figures navigated the brambles and made their way up into the garden proper. Once on the lawn, and out of the shadows of the trees, they were visible as gray shapes against the house. Karney watched them advance to the back door, heard a noise from the back door as Catso-much the more nimble-fingered of the two-forced the lock. Then the duo slid into the interior of the house. He was alone.

Not quite alone. He still had his companions on the cord. He checked up and down the pathway, his eyes gradually becoming sharper in the sodium-tinted gloom. There were no pedestrians. Satisfied, he pulled the knots from his pockets. His hands were ghosts in front of him; he could hardly see the knots at all. But, almost without his conscious intention guiding them, his fingers began to take up their investigation afresh, and odd though it seemed, he made more impression on the problem in a few seconds of blind manipulation than he had in many of the hours preceding. Robbed of his eyes he went purely on instinct, and it worked wonders. Again he had the bewildering sensation of intentionality in the knot, as if more and more it was an agent in its own undoing. Encouraged by the tang of victory, his fingers slid over the knot with inspired accuracy, seeming to alight upon precisely the right threads to manipulate.

He glanced again along the pathway to be certain it was still empty, then looked back toward the house. The door remained open. There was no sign of either Catso or Brendan, however. He returned his attention to the problem in hand. He almost wanted to laugh at the ease with which the knot was suddenly slipping undone. His eyes,

sparked by his mounting excitement perhaps, had begun to play a startling trick. Flashes of color-rare, unnamable tints-were igniting in front of him, their origins the heart of the knot. The light caught his fingers as they worked. By it, his flesh became translucent. He could see his nerve endings, bright with newfound sensibility; the rods of his finger bones visible to the marrow Then, almost as suddenly as they flickered into being, the colors would die, leaving his eyes bewitched in darkness until once more they ignited.

His heart began to hammer in his ears. The knot, he sensed, was mere seconds from solution. The interwoven threads were positively springing apart. His fingers were the cord's playthings now, not the other way about. He opened loops to feed the other two knots through. He pulled, he pushed; all at the cord's behest. And now colors came again, but this time his fingers were invisible, and instead he could see something glowing in the last few hitches of the knot. The form writhed like a fish in a net, growing bigger with every stitch he cast off. The hammer in his head doubled in tempo. The air around him had become almost glutinous, as if he were immersed in mud.

Someone whistled. He knew the signal should have carried some significance for him, but he couldn't recall what. There were too many distractions: the thickening air, his pounding head, the knot untying itself in his helpless hand while the figure at its center-sinuous, glittering-raged and swelled.

The whistle came again. This time its urgency shook him from his trance. He looked up. Brendan was already crossing the garden, with Catso trailing a few yards behind. Karney had a moment only to register their appearance before the knot initiated the final phase of its resolution. The last weave fell free, and the form at its heart leaped up toward Karney's face-growing at an exponential rate. He flung himself backward to avoid losing his head and the thing shot past him. Shocked, he stumbled in the tangle of brambles and fell in a bed of thorns. Above his head the foliage was shaking as if in a high wind. Leaves and small twigs showered down around him. He stared up into the branches to try and catch sight of the shape, but it was already out of sight.

"Why didn't you answer me, you fucking idiot?" Brendan demanded. "We thought you'd split on us. Karney had barely registered Brendan's breathless arrival. He was still searching the canopy of the trees above his head. The reek of cold mud filled his nostrils.

"You'd better move yourself' Brendan said, climbing through the

broken fence and out on to the pathway. Karney struggled to get to his feet, but the barbs of the brambles slowed his attempt, catching in his hair and clothes. "Shit!" he heard Brendan breathe from the far side of the fence. "Police! On the bridge."

Catso had reached the bottom of the garden.

"What are you doing down there?" he asked Karney.

Karney raised his hand. "Help me," he said. Catso grabbed him by the wrist, but even as he did so Brendan hissed: "Police! Move it!" and Catso relinquished his aid and ducked out through the fence to follow Brendan down to the Archway Road. It took Karney a few dizzied seconds only to realize that the cord, with its two remaining knots, had gone from his hand. He hadn't dropped it, he was certain of that. More likely it had deliberately deserted him, and its only opportunity had been his brief hand-to-hand contact with Catso. He reached out to grasp hold of the rotting fence and haul himself to his feet. Catso had to be warned of what the cord had done, police or no police. There was worse than the law nearby.

Racing down the pathway, Catso was not even aware that the knots had found their surreptitious way into his hand. He was too preoccupied with the problem of escape. Brendan had already disappeared on to the Archway Road and was away. Catso chanced a look over his shoulder to see if the police were in pursuit. There was no sign of them, however. Even if they began to give chase now, he reasoned, they wouldn't catch him. That left Karney. Catso slowed his pace, then stopped, looking back up the pathway to see if the idiot showed any sign of following, but he had not so much as climbed through the fence.

"Damn him," Catso said beneath his breath. Perhaps he should retrace his steps and fetch him? As he hesitated on the darkened pathway he became aware that what he had taken to be a gusty wind in the overhanging trees had abruptly died away. The sudden silence mystified him. He drew his gaze from the path to look up into the canopy of branches and his appalled eyes focused on the shape that was crawling down toward him, bringing with it the reek of mud and dissolution, Slowly, as in a dream, he raised his hands to keep the creature from touching him, but it reached down with wet, icy limbs and snatched him up.

Karney, in the act of climbing through the fence, caught sight of Catso being hauled off his feet and into the cover of the trees, saw his

legs pedaling the air while stolen merchandise fell from his pockets, and skipped down the pathway toward the Archway Road.

Then Catso shrieked, and his dangling legs began an even more frenzied motion. At the top of the pathway, Karney heard somebody calling. One policeman to another, he surmised. The next moment he heard the sound of running feet. He glanced up to Hornsey Lane-the officers had yet to reach the top of the pathway-and then looked back down in Catso's direction in time to catch sight of his body dropping from the tree. It fell to the ground limply, but the next moment scrambled to its feet. Briefly Catso looked back up the pathway toward Karney. The look on his face, even in the sodium gloom, was a lunatic's look. Then he began to run. Karney, satisfied that Catso had a head start, slipped back through the fence as the two policemen appeared at the head of the pathway and began in pursuit of Catso. All this-the knot, the thieves, pursuit, shriek and all-had occupied a mere handful of seconds, during which Karney had not drawn breath. Now he lay on a barbed pillow of brambles and gasped like a landed fish, while at the other side of the fence the police hurtled down the footpath yelling after their suspect.

Catso scarcely heard their commands. It wasn't the police that he was running from, it was the muddied thing that had lifted him up to meet its slitted and chancred face. Now, as he reached the Archway Road, he felt tremors beginning in his limbs. If his legs gave out he was certain it would come for him again and lay its mouth on his as it already had. Only this time he would not have the strength to scream; the life would be sucked from his lungs. His only hope lay in putting the road between him and his tormentor. The beast's breath loud in his ears, he scaled the crash barrier, leaped down to the road, and began across the southbound freeway at a run. Halfway across he realized his error. The horror in his head had blinded him to all other risks. A blue Volvo-its driver's mouth a perfect 0-bore down on him. He was caught in its headlights like an animal, entranced. Two instants later he was struck a glancing blow which threw him across the divide and into the path of a tractor trailer. The second driver had no chance to swerve. The impact split Catso open and tossed him beneath the wheels.

Up in the garden, Karney heard the panic of the brakes and the policeman at the bottom of the pathway say: "Jesus Christ Almighty." He waited a few seconds, then peered out from his hiding place. The footpath was now deserted, top to bottom. The trees were quite still. From the road below rose the sound of a siren, and that of the officers shouting for oncoming cars to halt. Closer by, somebody was sobbing.

He listened intently for a few moments, trying to work out the source of the sobs, before realizing that they were his own. Tears or no, the clamor from below demanded his attention. Something terrible had happened, and he had to see what. But he was afraid to run the gauntlet of the trees, knowing what lay in wait there, so he stood, staring up into the branches, trying to locate the beast. There was neither sound nor movement, however. The trees were dead still. Stifling his fears, he climbed from his hiding place and began to walk down the pathway, his eyes glued to the foliage for the slightest sign of the beast's presence. He could hear the buzz of a gathering crowd. The thought of a press of people comforted him. From now on he would need a place to hide, wouldn't he? Men who'd seen miracles did.

He had reached the spot where Catso had been dragged up into the trees; a litter of leaves and stolen property marked it. Karney's feet wanted to be swift, to pick him up and whisk him away from the place, but some perverse instinct slowed his pace. W as it that he wanted to tempt the knot's child into showing its face? Better, perhaps, to confront it now-in all its foulness-than to Jive in fear from this moment on, embroidering its countenance and its capacities. But the beast kept itself hidden. If indeed it was still up there in the tree, it twitched not a nail. Something moved beneath his foot. Karney looked down, and there, almost lost among the leaves, was the cord. Catso had been deemed unworthy to carry it apparently. Now-with some clue to its power revealed-it made no effort to pass for natural. It squirmed on the gravel like a serpent in heat, rearing its knotted head to attract Karney's attention. He wanted to ignore its cavorting but he couldn't. He knew that if he didn't pick up the knots somebody else would, given time; a victim, like himself, of an urge to solve enigmas. Where could such Innocence lead, except to another escape perhaps more terrible than the first? No, it was best that he took the knots. At least he was alive to their potential, and so, in part, armored against it. He bent down, and as he did so the string fairly leaped into his hands, wrapping itself around his fingers so tightly he almost cried out.

"Bastard," he said.

The string coiled itself around his hand, weaving its length between his fingers in an ecstasy of welcome. He raised his hand to watch its performance better. His concern for the events on the Archway Road had suddenly, almost miraculously, evaporated. What did such petty concerns matter? It was only life and death. Better to make his getaway now, while he could.

Above his head a branch shook. He unglued his eyes from the knots and squinted up into the tree. With the cord restored to him his trepidation, like his fears, had evaporated.

"Show yourself," he said. "I'm not like Catso; I'm not afraid. I want to know what you are."

From its camouflage of leaves the waiting beast leaned down toward Karney and exhaled a single, chilly breath. It smelled of the river at low tide, of vegetation gone to rot. Karney was about to ask it what it was again when he realized that the exhalation was the beast's reply. All it could speak of its condition was contained in that bitter and rancid breath. As replies went, it was not lacking in eloquence. Distressed by the images it awoke, Karney backed away from the spot. Wounded, sluggish forms moved behind his eyes, engulfed in a sludge of filth. A few feet from the tree the spell of the breath broke, and Karney drank the polluted air from the road as though it were clean as the world's morning. He turned his back on the agonies he had sensed, thrust his string-woven hand into his pocket, and began up the pathway. Behind him, the trees were quite still again.

Several dozen spectators had gathered on the bridge to watch the proceedings below. Their presence had in turn piqued the curiosity of drivers making their way along Hornsey Lane, some of whom had parked their vehicles and gotten out to join the throng. The scene beneath the bridge seemed too remote to wake any feelings in Karney. He stood among the chattering crowd and gazed down quite dispassionately He recognized Catso's corpse from his clothes; little else remained of his sometime companion.

In a while, he knew, he would have to mourn. But at present he could feel nothing. After all, Catso was dead, wasn't he? His pain and confusion were at an end. Karney sensed he would be wiser to save his tears for those whose agonies were only just beginning.

And again, the knots.

At home that tried to put them away, but, after the events of the evening they had taken on a fresh glamour. The knots bound beasts. How, and why, he couldn't know; nor, curiously, did he much care at the moment. All his life he had accepted that the world was rich with mysteries a mind of his limited grasp had no hope of understanding. That was the only genuine lesson his schooldays had taught: that he was ignorant. This new imponderable was just another to tag onto a long list.

Only one rationale really occurred to him, and that was that somehow Pope had arranged his stealing of the knots in the full knowledge that the loosened beast would revenge itself on the old man's tormentors; and it wasn't to be until Catso's cremation, six days later, that Karney was to get some confirmation of that theory. In the interim he kept his fears to him-self, reasoning that the less he said about the night's events the less harm they could do him. Talk lent the fantastic credibility. It gave weight to phenomena which he hoped, if left to themselves, would become too frail to survive.

When the following day the police came to the house on a routine questioning of Catso's friends, he claimed he knew nothing of the circumstances surrounding the death. Brendan had done the same, and as there had seemingly been no witnesses to offer contrary testimony, Karney was not questioned again. Instead he was left to his thoughts; and the knots.

Once, he saw Brendan. He had expected recriminations. Brendan's belief was that Catso had been running from the police when he was killed, and it had been Karney's lack of concentration that had failed to alert them to the Law's proximity. But Brendan made no accusations. He had taken the burden of guilt onto himself with a willingness that almost smacked of appetite; he spoke only of his own failure, not of Karney's. The apparent arbitrariness of Catso's demise had uncovered an unexpected tenderness in Brendan, and Karney ached to tell him the whole incredible story from beginning to end. But this was not the time, he sensed. He let Brendan spill his hurt out, and kept his own mouth shut.

And still the knots.

Sometimes he would wake in the middle of the night and feel the cord moving beneath his pillow. Its presence was comforting, its eagerness was not, waking, as it did, a similar eagerness in him. He wanted to touch the remaining knots and examine the puzzles they offered. But he knew that to do so was tempting capitulation: to his own fascination, to their hunger for release. When such temptation arose, he forced himself to remember the pathway, and the beast in the trees; to awake again the harrowing thoughts that had come with the beast's breath. Then, by degrees, remembered distress would cancel present curiosity, and he would leave the cord where it lay. Out of sight, though seldom out of mind.

Dangerous as he knew the knots to be, he couldn't bring himself to burn them. As long as he possessed that modest length of cord he was

unique. To relinquish it would be to return to his hitherto nondescript condition. He was not willing to do that, even though he suspected that his daily and intimate association with the cord was systematically weakening his ability to resist its seduction.

Of the thing in the tree he saw nothing. He even began to wonder if he hadn't imagined the whole confrontation. Indeed, given time, his powers to rationalize the truth into nonexistence might have won the day completely. But events subsequent to the cremation of Catso put an end to such a convenient option.

Karney had gone to the service alone-and, despite the presence of Brendan, Red and Anelisa-he had left alone. He had little wish to speak with any of the mourners. Whatever words he might once have had to frame the events were becoming more difficult to reinvent as time passed. He hurried away from the crematorium before anyone could approach him to talk, his head bowed against the dusty wind which had brought periods of cloud and bright sunshine in swift succession throughout the day. As he walked, he dug in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes. The cord, waiting there as ever, welcomed his fingers in its usual ingratiating manner. He disentangled it and took out the cigarettes, but the wind was too snappy for matches to stay alight, and his hands seemed unable to perform the simple task of masking the flame. He wandered on a little way until he found an alley and stepped into it to light up. Pope was there, waiting for him.

"Did you send flowers?" the derelict asked.

Karney's instinct was to turn and run. But the sunlit road was no more than yards away; he was in no danger here. And an exchange with the old man might prove informative.

"No flowers?" Pope said.

"No flowers," Karney returned. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you," Pope replied. "Came to see the boy burn." He grinned; the expression on that wretched, grimy face was repulsive to a fault. Pope was still the bag of bones that he'd been in the tunnel two weeks previously, but now an air of threat hung about him. Karney was grateful to have the sun at his back.

"And you. To see you," Pope said; Karney chose to make no reply. He struck a match and lit his cigarette.

"You've got something that belongs to me," Pope said. Karney

volunteered no guilt. "I want my knots back, boy, before you do some real damage."

"1 don't know what you're talking about," Karney replied. His gaze concentrated, unwillingly, on Pope's face, drawn into its intricacies. The alleyway, with its piled refuse, twitched. A cloud had apparently drifted over the sun, for Karney's vision, but for the figure of Pope, darkened subtly.

"It was stupid, boy, to try and steal from me. Not that I wasn't easy prey. That was my error and it won't happen again. I get lonely sometimes, you see. I'm sure you understand. And when I'm lonely I take to drinking." Though mere seconds had apparently passed since Karney had lit his cigarette, it had burned down to the filter without his taking a single pull on it. He dropped it, vaguely aware that time, as well as space, was being pulled out of true in the tiny passage.

"It wasn't me," he muttered; a child's defense in the face of any and every accusation.

"Yes it was," Pope replied with incontestable authority. "Let's not waste breath with fabrication. You stole from me, and your colleague has paid the price. You can't undo the harm you've done. But you can prevent further harm, if you return to me what's mine. Now."

Karney's hand had strayed to his pocket, without his quite realizing it. He wanted to get out of this trap before it snapped on him. Giving Pope what was, after all, rightfully his was surely the easiest way to do it. His fingers hesitated, however. Why? Because the Methuselah's eyes were so implacable perhaps; because returning the knots into Pope's hands gave him total control over the weapon that had, in effect, killed Catso? But more, even now, with sanity at risk, Karney was loath to give back the only fragment of mystery that had ever come his way. Pope, sensing his disinclination, pressed his cajoling into a higher gear.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I won't do you any harm unless you push me to it. I would much prefer that we concluded this matter peacefully. M ore violence, another death even, would only attract attention." Is this a killer I'm looking at? Karney thought; so unkempt, so ridiculously feeble. And yet sound contradicted sight. The seed of command Karney had once heard in Pope's voice was now in full flower.

"Do you want money?" Pope asked. "Is that it? Would your pride be

best appeased if I offered you something for your troubles?" Karney looked incredulously at Pope's shabbiness. "Oh," the old man said, "I may not look like a moneyed man, but appearances can be deceptive. In fact, that's the rule, not the exception. Take yourself, for instance. You don't look like a dead man, but take it from me, you are as good as dead, boy. I promise you death if you continue to defy me."

The speech-so measured, so scrupulous-startled Karney, coming as it did from Pope's lips. Two weeks ago they had caught Pope in his cups-confused and vulnerable-but now, sober, the man spoke like a potentate; a lunatic king, perhaps, going among the hoi polloi as a pauper. King? No, more like priest. Something in the nature of his authority (in his name, even) suggested a man whose power had never been rooted in mere politics.

"Once more," he said, "I request you to give me what's mine."

He took a step toward Karney. The alleyway was a narrow tunnel, pressing down on their heads. If there was sky above them, Pope had blinded it.

"Give me the knots," he said. His voice was softly reassuring. The darkness had closed in completely. All Karney could see was the man's mouth: his uneven teeth, his gray tongue. "Give them to me, thief, or suffer the consequences.

"Karney?"

Red's voice came from another world. It was just a few paces away-the voice, sunlight, wind-but for a long moment Karney struggled to locate it again.

"Karney?"

He dragged his consciousness out from between Pope's teeth and forced his face around to look at the road. Red was there, standing in the sun, Anelisa at his side. Her blond hair shone.

"What's going on?"

"Leave us alone," Pope said. "We've got business, he and I."

"You've got business with him?" Red asked of Karney.

Before Karney could reply Pope said: "Tell him. Tell him, Karney, you want to speak to me alone." Red threw a glance over Karney's

shoulder toward the old man. "You want to tell me what's going on?" he said. Karney's tongue was laboring to find a response, but failing. The sunlight was so far away; every time a cloud shadow passed across the street he feared the light would be extinguished permanently. His lips worked silently to express his fear.

"You all right?" Red asked. "Kamey? Can you hear me?"

Karney nodded. The darkness that held him was beginning to lift.

"Yes…" he said.

Suddenly, Pope threw himself at Karney, his hands scrabbling desperately for his pockets. The impact of the attack carried Karney, still in a stupor, back against the wall of the alleyway. He fell sideways against a pile of crates. They, and he, toppled over, and Pope, his grip on Karney too fierce to be dislodged, fell too. All the preceding calm the gallows humor, the circumspect threats-had evaporated. He was again the idiot derelict, spouting insanities. Karney felt the man's hands tearing at his clothes and raking his skin in his bid for the knots. The words he was shouting into Karney's face were no longer comprehensible.

Red stepped into the alley and attempted to drag the old man, by coat or hair or beard, whichever handhold presented itself, off his victim. It was easier said than done; the assault had all the fury of a fit. But Red's superior strength won out. Spitting nonsense, Pope was pulled to his feet. Red held on to him as if he were a mad dog. "Get up he told Karney, "get out of his reach."

Karney staggered to his feet among the tinder of crates. In the scant seconds of his attack Pope had done considerable damage. Karney was bleeding in half a dozen places. His clothes had been savaged; his shirt ripped beyond repair. Tentatively, he put his hand to his raked face. The scratches were raised like ritual scars. Red pushed Pope against the wall. The derelict was still apoplectic, eyes wild. A stream of invective-a jumble of English and gibberish-was flung in Red's face. Without pausing in his tirade Pope made another attempt to attack Karney, but this time Red's handhold prevented the claws from making contact. Red hauled Pope out of the alley and into the road.

"Your lip's bleeding," Anelisa said, looking at Karney with plain disgust. Karney could taste the blood, salty and hot. He put the back of his hand to his mouth. It came away scarlet.

"Good thing we came after you," she said.

"Yeah," he returned, not looking at the woman. He was ashamed of the showing he'd made in the face of the vagrant and knew she must be laughing at his inability to defend himself. Her family were villains to a man, her father a folk hero among thieves.

Red came back in from the street. Pope had gone.

"What was all that about?" he demanded to know, taking a comb from his jacket pocket and rearranging his hair. "Nothing," Karney replied.

"Don't give me shit," Red said. "He claims you stole something from him. Is that right?"

Karney glanced across at Anelisa. But for her presence he might have been willing to tell Red everything, there and then. She returned his glance and seemed to read his thoughts. Shrugging, she moved out of earshot, kicking through the demolished crates as she went.

"He's got it in for us all, Red," Karney said.

"What are you talking about?"

Karney looked down at his bloody hand. Even with Anelisa out of the way, the words to explain what he suspected were slow in coming.

"Catso he began.

"What about him?"

"He was running, Red."

Behind him, Anelisa expelled an irritated sigh. This was taking longer than she had temper for. "Red," she said, “we'll be late."

"Wait a minute," Red told her sharply and turned his attention back to Karney. "What do you mean: about Catso?" "The old man's not what he seems. He's not a vagrant."

"Oh? What is he?" A note of sarcasm had crept back into Red's voice, for Anelisa's benefit, no doubt. The girl had tired of discretion and had wandered back to join Red. "What is he, Karney?"

Karney shook his head. What was the use of trying to explain a part of what had happened? Either he attempted the entire story, or nothing at all. Silence was easier.

"It doesn't matter," he said flatly.

Red gave him a puzzled look, then, when there was no clarification forthcoming, said: "If you've got something to tell me about Catso, Karney, I'd like to hear it. You know where I live."

"Sure," said Karney.

"I mean it," Red said, “about talking."

"Thanks."

"Catso was a good mate, you know? Bit of a piss-artist, but we've all had our moments, eh? He shouldn't have died, Karney. It was wrong.”

"Red-”

"She's calling you." Anelisa had wandered out into the street.

"She's always calling me. I'll see you around, Karney."

"Yeah."

Red patted Karney's stinging cheek and followed Anelisa out into the sun. Karney made no move to follow them. Pope's assault had left him trembling. He intended to wait in the alleyway until he'd regained a gloss of composure, at least. Seeking reassurance of the knots he put his hand into his jacket pocket. It was empty. He checked his other pockets. They too were empty, and yet he was certain that the old man's grasp had failed to get near the cord. Perhaps they had slipped out of hiding during the struggle. Karney began to scour the alley, and when the first search failed, followed with a second and a third. But by that time he knew the operation was lost. Pope had succeeded after all. By stealth or chance, he had regained the knots.

With startling clarity, Karney remembered standing on Suicides' Leap, looking down on to the Archway Road, Catso's body sprawled below at the center of a network of lights and vehicles. He had felt so removed from the tragedy, viewing it with all the involvement of a passing bird. Now-suddenly-he was shot from the sky. He was on the ground, and wounded, waiting hopelessly for the terrors to come. He tasted blood from his split lip and wondered, wishing the thought would vanish even as it formed, if Catso had died immediately or if he too had tasted blood as he'd lain there on the tarmac looking up at the people on the bridge who had yet to learn how close death was.

He returned home via the most populated route he could plan. Though this exposed his disreputable state to the stares of matrons and policemen alike he preferred their disapproval to chancing the empty streets away from the major thorough fares. Once home, he bathed his scratches and put on a fresh set of clothes, then sat in front of the television for a while to allow his limbs to stop shaking. It was late afternoon and the programs were all children's fare; a tone of queasy optimism infected every channel. He watched the banalities with his eyes but not with his mind, using the respite to try and find the words to describe all that had happened to him. The imperative was now to warn Red and Brendan. With Pope in control of the knots it could only be a matter of time before some beast worse, perhaps, than the thing in the trees – came looking for them all. Then it would be too late for explanations. He knew the other two would be contemptuous, but he would sweat to convince them, however ridiculous he ended up looking in the process. Perhaps his tears and his panic would move them the way his impoverished vocabulary never could. About five after five, before his mother returned home from work he slipped out of the house and went to find Brendan.

Anelisa took the piece of string she'd found in the alleyway out of her pocket and examined it. Why she had bothered to pick it up at all she wasn't certain, but somehow it had found its way into her hand. She played with one of the knots risking her long nails in doing so. She had half a dozen better things, to be doing with her early evening. Red had gone to buy drink and cigarettes and she had promised herself a leisurely, scented bath before he returned. But the knot wouldn't take that long to untie, she was certain of that. Indeed, it seemed almost eager to be undone; she had the strangest sensation of movement in it. And more intriguing yet, there were colors in the knot-she could see glints of crimson and violet. Within a few minutes she had forgotten the bath entirely; it could wait. Instead, she concentrated on the conundrum at her fingertips. After only a few minutes she began to see the light.

Karney told Brendan the story as best he could. Once he had taken the plunge and begun it from the beginning he discovered it had its own momentum, which carried him through to the present tense with relatively little hesitation. He finished, saying: "I know it sounds wild, but it's all true."

Brendan didn't believe a word; that much was apparent in his blank stare. But there was more than disbelief on the scarred face. Karney couldn't work out what it was until Brendan took hold of his shirt. Only then did he see the depth of Brendan's fury.

"You don't think it's bad enough that Catso's dead," he seethed, “you have to come here telling me this shit." "It's the truth."

"And where are these fucking knots now?"

"I told you, the old man's got them. He took them this afternoon. He's going to kill us, Bren. I know it." Brendan let Karney go. "Tell you what I'm going to do," he said magnanimously. "I'm going to forget you told me any of this."

"You don't understand-”

"I said: I'm going to forget you uttered one word. All right? Now you just get the fuck out of here and take your funny stories with you.

Karney didn't move.

"You hear me?" Brendan shouted. Karney caught sight of a telltale fullness at the edge of Brendan's eyes. The anger was camouflage-barely adequate-for a grief he had no mechanism to prevent. In Brendan's present mood neither fear nor argument would convince him of the truth. Karney stood up "I'm sorry," he said. "I'll go."

Brendan shook his head, face down. He did not raise it again, but left Karney to make his own way out. There was only Red now; he was the final court of appeal. The story, now told, could be told again, couldn't it? Repetition would be easy. Already turning the words over in his head, he left Brendan to his tears.

Anelisa heard Red come in through the front door; heard him call out a word; heard him call it again. The word was familiar, but it took her several seconds of fevered thought to recognize it as her own name. "Anelisa!" he called again. "Where are you?"

Nowhere, she thought. I'm the invisible woman. Don't come looking for me. Please God, just leave me alone. She put her hand to her mouth to stop her teeth from chattering. She had to stay absolutely still, absolutely silent. If she stirred so much as a hair's breadth it would hear her and come for her. The only safety lay in tying herself into a tiny ball and sealing her mouth with her palm.

Red began to climb the stairs. Doubtless Anelisa was in the bath, singing to herself. The woman loved water as she loved little else. It was not uncommon for her to spend hours immersed, her breasts breaking the surface like two dream islands. Four steps from the landing he heard a noise in the hallway below-a cough, or something

like it. Was she playing some game with him? He turned about and descended, moving more stealthily now. Almost at the bottom of the stairs his gaze fell on a piece of cord which had been dropped on one of the steps. He picked it up and briefly puzzled over the single knot in its length before the noise came again. This time he did not pretend to himself that it was Anelisa. He held his breath, waiting for another prompt from along the hallway. When none came he dug into the side of his boot and pulled out his switchblade, a weapon he had carried on his person since the tender age of eleven. An adolescent's weapon, Anelisa's father had advised him. But now, advancing along the hallway to the living room, he thanked the patron saint of blades he had not taken the old felon's advice.

The room was gloomy. Evening was on the house, shuttering up the windows. Red stood for a long while in the doorway anxiously watching the interior for movement. Then the noise again; not a single sound this time, but a whole series of them. The source, he now realized to his relief, was not human. It was a dog most likely, wounded in a fight. Nor was the sound coming from the room in front of him, but from the kitchen beyond. His courage bolstered by the fact that the intruder was merely an animal, he reached for the light switch and flipped it on. The helter-skelter of events he initiated in so doing occurred in a breathless sequence that occupied no more than a dozen seconds, yet he lived each one in the minutest detail. In the first second, as the light came on, he saw something move across the kitchen floor; in the next, he was walking toward it, knife still in hand. The third brought the animal-alerted to his planned aggression-out of hiding. It ran to meet him, a blur of glistening flesh. Its sudden proximity was overpowering: its size, the heat from its steaming body, its vast mouth expelling a breath like rot. Red took the fourth and fifth seconds to avoid its first lunge, but on the sixth it found him. Its raw arms snatched at his body. He slashed out with his knife and opened a wound in it, but it closed in and took him in a lethal embrace. More through accident than intention, the switch-blade plunged into its flesh, and liquid heat splashed up into Red's face. He scarcely noticed. His last three seconds were upon him. The weapon, slick with blood, slid from his grasp and was left embedded in the beast. Unarmed, he attempted to squirm from its clasp, but before he could slide out of harm's way the great unfinished head was pressing toward him-the maw a tunnel-and sucked one solid breath from his lungs. It was the only breath Red possessed. His brain, deprived of oxygen, threw a fireworks display in celebration of his imminent departure: roman candles, star shells, catherine wheels. The pyrotechnics were all too brief, too soon, the darkness.

Upstairs, Anelisa listened to the chaos of sound and tried to piece it together, but she could not. Whatever had happened, however, it had ended in silence. Red did not come looking for her. But then neither did the beast. Perhaps, she thought, they had killed each other. The simplicity of this solution pleased her. She waited in her room until hunger and boredom got the better of trepidation and then went downstairs. Red was lying where the cord's second offspring had dropped him, his eyes wide open to watch the fireworks. The beast itself squatted in the far corner of the room, a ruin of a thing, seeing it, she backed away from Red's body toward the door. It made no attempt to move toward her, but simply followed her with deep-set eyes, its breathing coarse, its few movements sluggish.

She would go to find her father, she decided, and fled the house, leaving the front door ajar.

It was still ajar half an hour later when Karney arrived. Though he had fully intended to go straight to Red's home after leaving Brendan, his courage had faltered. Instead, he had wandered-without conscious planning-to the bridge over the Archway Road. He had stood there for a long space watching the traffic below and drinking from the half bottle of vodka he had bought on Holloway Road. The purchase had cleared him of cash, but the spirits, on his empty stomach, had been potent and clarified his thinking. They would all die, he had concluded. Maybe the fault was his for stealing the cord in the first place. M ore probably Pope would have punished them anyway for their crimes against his person. The best they might now hope-he might hope-was a smidgen of comprehension. That would almost be enough, his spirit-slurred brain decided: just to die a little less ignorant of mysteries than he'd been born. Red would understand.

Now he stood on the step and called the man's name. There came no answering shout. The vodka in his system made him impudent and, calling for Red again, he stepped into the house. The hallway was in darkness, but a light burned in one of the far rooms and he made his way toward it. The atmosphere in the house was sultry, like the interior of a greenhouse. It became warmer still in the living room, where Red was losing body heat to the air. Karney stared down at him long enough to register that he was holding the cord in his left hand and that only one knot remained in it. Perhaps Pope had been here and for some reason left the knots behind. However it had come about, their presence in Red's hand offered a chance for life. This time, he swore as he approached the body, he would destroy the cord once and for all. Burn it and scatter the ashes to the four winds. He stooped to remove it from Red's grip. It sensed his nearness and slipped, blood-

sleek, out of the dead man's hand and up into Karney's, where it wove itself between his digits, leaving a trail behind it. Sickened, Karney stared at the final knot. The process which had taken him so much painstaking effort to initiate now had its own momentum. With the second knot untied the third was virtually loosening itself. It still required a human agent apparently-why else did it leap so readily into his hand?-but it was already close to solving its own riddle. It was imperative he destroy it quickly, before it succeeded. Only then did he become aware that he was not alone. Besides the dead, there was a living presence close by. He looked up from the cavorting knot as somebody spoke to him. The words made no sense. They were scarcely words at all, more a sequence of wounded sounds. Karney remembered the breath of the thing on the footpath and the ambiguity of the feelings it had engendered in him. Now the same ambiguity moved him again. With the rising fear came a sense that the voice of the beast spoke loss, whatever its language. A rumor of pity moved in him. "Show yourself," he said, not knowing whether it would Understand or not.

A few tremulous heartbeats passed, and then it emerged from the far door. The light in the living room was good, and Karney's eyesight sharp, but the beast's anatomy defied his comprehension. There was something simian in its flayed, palpitating form, but sketchy, as if it had been born prematurely. Its mouth opened to speak another sound. Its eyes, buried beneath the bleeding slab of a brow, were unreadable. It began to shamble out of its hiding place across the room toward him, each drooping step it took tempting his cowardice. When it reached Red's corpse it stopped, raised one of its ragged limbs, and indicated a place in the crook of its neck. Karney saw the knife-Red's, he guessed. Was it attempting to justify the killing, he wondered?

"What are you?" he asked it. The same question.

It shook its heavy head back and forth. A long, low moan issued from its mouth. Then, suddenly, it raised its arm and pointed directly at Karney. In so doing it let light fall fully on its face, and Karney could make out the eyes beneath the louring brow: twin gems trapped in the wounded ball of its skull. Their brilliance, and their lucidity, turned Karney's stomach over. And still it pointed at him.

"What do you want?" he asked it. "Tell me what you want.

It dropped its peeled limb and made to step across the body toward Karney, but it had no chance to make its intentions clear. A shout from the front door froze it in its lolling tracks.

"Anybody in?" the inquirer wanted to know Its face registered panic-the too-human eyes rolled in their raw sockets-and it turned away, retreating toward the kitchen. The visitor, whoever he was, called again; his voice was closer. Kamey stared down at the corpse, and at his bloody hand, juggling his options, then started across the room and through the door into the kitchen. The beast had already gone. The back door stood wide open. Behind him, Karney heard the visitor utter some half-formed prayer at seeing Red's remains. He hesitated in the shadows. Was this covert escape wise? Did it not do more to incriminate him than staying and trying to find a way to the truth? The knot, still moving in his hand, finally decided him. Its destruction had to be his priority. In the living room the visitor was dialing the emergency services. Using his panicked monologue as cover, Karney crept the remaining yards to the back door and fled.

"Somebody's been on the phone for you," his mother called down from the top of the stairs, “he's woken me twice already. I told him I didn't-”

"I'm sorry, Mom. Who was it?"

"Wouldn't say. I told him not to call back. You tell him, if he calls again, I don't want people ringing up at this time of night. Some people have to get up for work in the morning."

"Yes, mom."

His mother disappeared from the landing, and returned to her solitary bed; the door closed. Karney stood trembling in the hallway below, his hand clenched around the knot in his pocket. It was still moving, turning itself over and over against the confines of his palm, seeking more space, however small, in which to loosen itself. But he was giving it no latitude. He rummaged for the vodka he'd bought earlier in the evening, manipulated the top off the bottle single-handed, and drank. As he took a second, galling mouthful, the telephone rang. He put down the bottle and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

The caller was in a phone booth. The tone sounded, money was deposited, and a voice said: "Karney?" "Yes?"

"For Christ's sake, he's going to kill me.

"Who is this?"

"Brendan." The voice was not like Brendan's at all; too shrill, too fearful. "He'll kill me if you don't come. "Pope? Is it Pope?"

"He's out of his mind. You've got to come to the wrecking yard, at the top of the hill. Give him-" The line went dead. Karney put the receiver down. In his hand the cord was performing acrobatics. He opened his hand. In the dim light from the landing the remaining knot shimmered. At its heart, as at the heart of the other two knots, glints of color promised themselves. He closed his fist again, picked up the vodka bottle, and went back out.

The wrecking yard had once boasted a large and perpetually irate Doberman pinscher, but the dog had developed a tumor the previous spring and savaged its owner. It had subsequently been destroyed and no replacement bought. The corrugated iron wall was consequently easy to breach. Karney climbed over and down onto the cinder and gravel strewn ground on the other side. A floodlight at the front gate threw illumination onto the collection of vehicles, both domestic and commercial, which was assembled in the yard. Most were beyond salvation: rusted trucks and tankers, a bus which had apparently hit a low bridge at speed, a rogue's gallery of cars, lined up or piled upon each other, every one an accident casualty. Beginning at the gate, Karney began a systematic search of the yard, trying as best he could to keep his footsteps light, but he could find no sign of Pope or his prisoner at the northwest end of the yard. Knot in hand, he began to advance down the enclosure, the reassuring light at the gate dwindling with every step he took. A few paces on he caught sight of flames between two of the vehicles. He stood still and tried to interpret the intricate play of shadow and firelight. Behind him he heard movement and turned, anticipating with every heartbeat a cry, a blow. None came. He scoured the yard at his back-the image of the yellow flame dancing on his retina-but whatever had moved was now still again.

"Brendan?" he whispered, looking back toward the fire.

In a slab of shadow in front of him a figure moved, and Brendan stumbled out and fell to his knees in the cinders a few feet from where Karney stood. Even in the deceptive light Karney could see that Brendan was the worse for punishment. His shirt was smeared with stains too dark to be anything but blood. His face was contorted with present pain, or the anticipation of it. When Karney walked toward him he shied away like a beaten animal. "It's me. It's Karney."

Brendan raised his bruised head. "Make him stop."

"It'll be all right."

"Make him stop. Please."

Brendan's hands went up to his neck. A collar of rope encircled his throat. A leash led off from it into the darkness between two vehicles. There, holding the other end of the leash, stood Pope. His eyes glimmered in the shadows, although they had no source to glean their light from.

"You were wise to come," Pope said. "I would have killed him."

"Let him go," Karney said.

Pope shook his head. "First the knot." He stepped out of hiding. Somehow Karney had expected him to have sloughed off his guise as a derelict and show his true face-whatever that might be-but he had not. He was dressed in the same shabby garb as he had always worn, but his control of the situation was incontestable. He gave a short tug on the rope and Brendan collapsed, choking, to the ground, hands tugging vainly at the noose closing about his throat.

"Stop it," Karney said. "I've got the knot, damn you. Don't kill him."

"Bring it to me."

Even as Karney took a step toward the old man something cried out in the labyrinth of the yard. Karney recognized the sound; so did Pope. It was unmistakably the voice of the flayed beast that had killed Red, and it was close by. Pope's besmirched face blazed with fresh urgency.

"Quickly!" he said, “or I kill him." He had drawn a gutting knife from his coat. Pulling on the leash, he coaxed Brendan close.

The complaint of the beast rose in pitch.

"The knot!" Pope said. "To me!" He stepped toward Brendan, and put the blade to the prisoner's close-cropped head. "Don't," said Karney, "just take the knot." But before he could draw another breath something moved at the corner of his eye, and his wrist was snatched in a scalding grip. Pope let out a shout of anger, and Karney turned to see the scarlet beast at his side meeting his gaze with a haunted stare. Karney wrestled to loose its hold, hut it shook its ravaged head.

"Kill it!" Pope yelled. "Kill it!"

The beast glanced across at Pope, and for the first time Karney saw an unequivocal look in its pale eyes: naked loathing. Then Brendan issued a sharp cry, and Karney looked his way in time to see the gutting knife slide into his cheek. Pope withdrew the blade, and let Brendan's corpse pitch forward. Before it had struck the ground he was crossing toward Karney, murderous intention in every stride. The beast, fear in its throat, released Karney's arm in time for him to sidestep Pope's first thrust. Beast and man divided and ran. Kamey's heels slithered in the loose cinders and for an instant he felt Pope's shadow on him, but slid from the path of the second cut with millimeters to spare.

"You can't get out," he heard Pope boast as he ran. The old man was so confident of his trap he wasn't even giving chase. "You're on my territory, boy. There's no way out."

Karney ducked into hiding between two vehicles and started to weave his way back toward the gate, but somehow he'd lost all sense of orientation. One parade of rusted hulks led onto another, so similar as to be indistinguishable. Wherever the maze led him there seemed to be no way out. He could no longer see the lamp at the gate or Pope's fire at the far end of the yard. It was all one hunting ground, and he the prey. And everywhere this daedal path led him, Pope's voice followed close as his heartbeat. "Give up the knot, boy," it said. "Give it up and I won't feed you your eyes.

Karney was terrified; but so, he sensed, was Pope. The cord was not an assassination tool, as Karney had always believed. Whatever its rhyme or reason, the old man did not have mastery of it. In that fact lay what slim chance of survival remained. The time had come to untie the final knot-untie it and take the consequences. Could they be any worse than death at Pope's hands?

Karney found an adequate refuge alongside a burned-out truck, slid down into a squatting position, and opened his fist. Even in the darkness, he could feel the knot working to decipher itself. He aided it as best he could. Again, Pope spoke. "Don't do it, boy," he said, pretending humanity. "I know what you're thinking and believe me it will be the end of you."

Karney's hands seemed to have sprouted thumbs, no longer the equal of the problem. His mind was a gallery of death portraits: Catso on the road, Red on the carpet, Brendan slipping from Pope's grip as the knife slid from his head. He forced the images away, marshaling his beleaguered wits as best he could. Pope had curtailed his

monologue. Now the only sound in the yard was the distant hum of traffic; it came from a world Karney doubted he would see again. He fumbled at the knot like a man at a locked door with a handful of keys, trying one and then the next and then the next, all the while knowing that the night is pressing on his back. "Quickly, quickly," he urged himself. But his former dexterity had utterly deserted him.

And then a hiss as the air was sliced, and Pope had found him-his face triumphant as he delivered the killing strike. Karney rolled from his squatting position, but the blade caught his upper arm, opening a wound that ran from shoulder to elbow. The pain made him quick, and the second strike struck the cab of the truck, winning sparks not blood. Before Pope could stab again Karney was dodging away, blood pulsing from his arm. The old man gave chase, but Karney was fleeter. He ducked behind one of the coaches and, as Pope panted after him, slipped into hiding beneath the vehicle. Pope ran past as Karney bit back a sob of pain. The wound he had sustained effectively incapacitated his left hand. Drawing his arm into his body to minimize the stress on his slashed muscle, he tried to finish the wretched work he had begun on the knot, using his teeth in place of a second hand. Splashes of white light were appearing in front of him; unconsciousness was not far distant. He breathed deeply and regularly through his nostrils as his fevered fingers pulled at the knot. He could no longer see, nor could scarcely feel, the cord in his hand. He was working blind, as he had on the footpath, and now, as then, his instincts began to work for him. The knot started to dance at his lips, eager for release. It was mere moments from solution.

In his devotion he failed to see the arm reach for him until he was being hauled out of his sanctuary and was staring up into Pope's shining eyes.

"No more games," the old man said, and loosed his hold on Karney to snatch the cord from between his teeth. Karney attempted to move a few torturous inches to avoid Pope's grasp, but the pain in his arm crippled him. He fell back, letting out a cry on impact.

"Out go your eyes," said Pope and the knife descended. The blinding blow never landed, however. A wounded form emerged from hiding behind the old man and snatched at the tails of his gabardine. Pope regained his balance in moments and spun around. The knife found his antagonist, and Karney opened his pain-blurred eyes to see the flayed beast reeling backward, its cheek slashed open to the bone. Pope followed through to finish the slaughter, but Karney didn't wait to watch. He reached up for purchase on the wreck and hauled

himself to his feet, the knot still clenched between his teeth. Behind him Pope cursed, and Karney knew he had forsaken the kill to follow. Knowing the pursuit was already lost, he staggered out from between the vehicles into the open yard. In which direction was the gate? He had no idea. His legs belonged to a comedian, not to him. They were rubber-jointed, useless for everything but pratfalls. Two steps forward and his knees gave out. The smell of gasoline-soaked cinders came up to meet him.

Despairing, he put his good hand up to his mouth. His fingers found a loop of cord. He pulled, hard, and miraculously the final hitch of the knot came free. He spat the cord from his mouth as a surging heat roasted his lips. It fell to the ground, its final seal broken, and from its core the last of its prisoners materialized. It appeared on the cinders like a sickly infant, its limbs vestigial, its bald head vastly too big for its withered body, the flesh of which was pale to the point of translucence. It flapped its palsied arms in a vain attempt to right itself as Pope stepped toward it, eager to slit its defenseless throat. What-ever Karney had hoped from the third knot it hadn't been this scrag of life-it revolted him.

And then it spoke. Its voice was no mewling infant's but that of a grown man, albeit spoken from a babe's mouth. "To me!" it called. "Quickly."

As Pope reached down to murder the child the air of the yard filled with the stench of mud, and the shadows disgorged a spiny, low' bellied thing, which slid across the ground toward him. Pope stepped back as the creature-as unfinished in its reptilian way as its simian brother-closed on the strange infant. Karney fully expected it to devour the morsel, but the pallid child raised its arms in welcome as the beast from the first knot curled about it. As it did so the second beast showed its ghastly face, moaning its pleasure. It laid its hands on the child and drew the wasted body up into its capacious arms, completing an unholy family of reptile, ape and child.

The union was not over yet, however. Even as the three creatures assembled their bodies began to fray, unraveling into ribbons of pastel matter. And even as their anatomies began to dissolve the strands were beginning a fresh configuration, filament entwining with filament. They were tying another knot, random and yet inevitable; more elaborate by far than any Karney had set fingers on. A new and perhaps insoluble puzzle was appearing from the pieces of the old, but, where they bad been inchoate, this one would be finished and whole. What though; what? As the skein of nerves and muscle moved

toward its final condition, Pope took his moment. He rushed forward, his face wild in the luster of the union, and thrust his gutting knife into the heart of the knot. But the attack was mistimed. A limb of ribboned light uncurled from the body and wrapped itself around Pope's wrist. The gabardine ignited. Pope's flesh began to burn. He screeched, and dropped the weapon. The limb released him, returning itself into the weave and leaving the old man to stagger backward, nursing his smoking arm. He looked to be losing his wits; he shook his head to and fro pitifully. Momentarily, his eyes found Karney, and a glimmer of guile crept back into them. He reached for the boy's injured arm and hugged him close. Karney cried out, but Pope, careless of his captive, dragged Karney away from where the wreathing was nearing its end and into the safety of the labyrinth. "He won't harm me," Pope was saying to himself, “not with you. Always had a weakness for children." He pushed Karney ahead of him. "Just get the papers… then away.

Karney scarcely knew if he was alive or dead. He had no strength left to fight Pope off. He just went with the old man, half crawling much of the time, until they reached Pope's destination: a car which was buried behind a heap of rusted vehicles. It bad no wheels. A bush which had grown through the chassis occupied the driver's seat. Pope opened the back door, muttering his satisfaction, and bent into the interior, leaving Karney slumped against the wing. Unconsciousness was a teasing moment away; Karney longed for it. But Pope had use for him yet. Retrieving a small book from its niche beneath the passenger seat, Pope whispered: "Now we must go. We've got business." Karney groaned as he was pressed forward.

"Close your mouth," Pope said, embracing him, “my brother has ears."

"Brother?" Karney murmured, trying to make sense of what Pope had let slip.

"Spellbound," Pope said, “until you."

"Beasts," Karney muttered, the mingled images of reptiles and apes assailing him.

"Human," Pope replied. "Evolution's the knot, boy."

"Human," Karney said and as the syllables left him his aching eyes caught sight of a gleaming form on the car at his tormentor's back. Yes, it was human. Still wet from its rebirth, its body running with

inherited wounds, but triumphantly human. Pope saw the recognition in Karney's eyes. He seized hold of him and was about to use the limp body as a shield when his brother intervened. The rediscovered man reached down from the height of the roof and caught hold of Pope by his narrow neck. The old man shrieked and tore himself loose, darting away across the cinders, but the other gave howling chase, pursuing him out of Karney's range.

From a long way off, Karney heard Pope's last plea as his brother overtook him, and then the words curved up into a scream Karney hoped never to hear the equal of again. After that, silence. The sibling did not return; for which, curiosity notwithstanding, Karney was grateful.

When, several minutes later, he mustered sufficient energy to make his way out of the yard-the light burned at the gate again, a beacon to the perplexed-he found Pope lying face down on the gravel. Even if he had possessed the strength, which he did not, a small fortune could not have persuaded Karney to turn the body over. Enough to see how the dead man's hands had dug into the ground in his torment, and how the bright coils of innards, once so neatly looped in his abdomen, spilled out from beneath him. The book Pope had been at such pains to retrieve lay at his side. Karney stooped, head spinning, to pick it up. It was, he felt, small recompense for the night of terrors he had endured. The near future would bring questions he could never hope to answer, accusations he had pitifully little' defense against. But, by the light of the gateside lamp, he found the stained pages more rewarding than he'd anticipated. Here, copied out in a meticulous hand, and accompanied by elaborate diagrams, were the theorems of Pope's forgotten science: the designs of knots for the securing of love and the winning of status; hitches to divide souls and bind them; for the making of fortunes and children; for the world's ruin.

After a brief perusal, he scaled the gate and clambered over onto the street. It was, at such an hour, deserted. A few lights burned in the housing project opposite; rooms where the sick waited out the hours until morning. Rather than ask any more of his exhausted limbs Karney decided to wait where he was until he could flag down a vehicle to take him where he might tell his story. He had plenty to occupy him. Although his body was numb and his head woozy, he felt more lucid than he ever had. He came to the mysteries on the pages of Pope's forbidden book as to an oasis.

Drinking deeply, he looked forward with rare exhilaration to the pilgrimage ahead.

XVIII: THE BODY POLITIC

Whenever he woke, Charlie George's hands stood Perhaps he would be feeling too hot under the blankets and have to throw a couple over to Ellen's side of the bed. Perhaps he might even get up, still half-asleep, and pad through to the kitchen to pour himself a tumbler of iced apple juice. Then back to bed, slipping in beside Ellen's gentle crescent, to let sleep drift over him. They'd wait then, until his eyes had flickered closed and his breathing become regular as clockwork, and they were certain he was sound asleep. Only then, when they knew consciousness was gone, would they dare to begin their secret lives again.

For months now Charlie had been waking up with an uncomfortable ache in his wrists and hands. "Go and see a doctor," Ellen would tell him, unsympathetic as ever. "Why won't you go and see a doctor?" He hated doctors, that was why. Who in their right minds would trust someone who made a profession out of poking around in sick people?

"I've probably been working too hard," he told himself.

"Some chance," Ellen muttered.

Surely that was the likeliest explanation. He was a packager by trade; he worked with his hands all day long. They got tired. It was only natural.

"Stop fretting, Charlie," he told his reflection one morning as he slapped some life into his face, “your hands are fit for anything."

So, night after night, the routine was the same. It goes like this: The Georges are asleep, side by side in their marital bed. He on his back, snoring gently; she curled up on his left-hand side. Charlie's head is propped up on two thick pillows. His jaw is slightly ajar, and beneath the vein-shot veil of his lids his eyes scan some dreamed adventure. Maybe a fire fighter tonight, perhaps a heroic dash into the heart of some burning brothel. He dreams contentedly; sometimes frowning, sometimes smirking.

There is a movement under the sheet. Slowly, cautiously it seems, Charlie's hands creep up out of the warmth of the bed and into the open air. Their index fingers weave like nailed heads as they meet on his undulating abdomen. They clasp each other in greeting, like comrades-in-arms. In his sleep Charlie moans. The brothel has

collapsed on him. The hands flatten themselves instantly, pretending innocence. After a moment, once the even rhythm of his breathing has resumed, they begin their debate in earnest.

A casual observer, sifting at the bottom of the Georges' bed, might take this exchange as a sign of some mental disorder in Charlie. The way his hands twitch and pluck at each other, stroking each other now, now seeming to fight. But there's clearly some code or sequence in their movements, however spasmodic. One might almost think that the slumbering man was deaf and dumb, and talking in his sleep. But the hands are speaking no recognizable sign language; nor are they trying to communicate with anyone but each other. This is a clandestine meeting, held purely between Charlie's hands. There they will stay through the night, perched on his stomach, plotting against the body politic.

Charlie wasn't entirely ignorant of the sedition that was simmering at his wrists. There was a fumbling suspicion in him that something in his life was not quite right. Increasingly, he had the sense of being cut off from common experience, becoming more and more a spectator to the daily (and nightly) rituals of living, rather than a participant. Take, for example, his love life.

He had never been a great lover, but neither did he feel he had anything to apologize for. Ellen seemed satisfied with his attentions. But these days he felt dislocated from the act. He would watch his hands traveling over Ellen, touching her with all the intimate skill they knew, and he would view their maneuvers as if from a great distance, unable to enjoy the sensations of warmth and wetness. Not that his digits were any less agile. Quite the reverse. Ellen had recently taken to kissing his fingers and telling him how clever they were. Her praise didn't reassure him one iota. If anything, it made him feel worse to think that his hands were giving such pleasure when he was feeling nothing.

There were other signs of his instability too. Small, irritating signs. He had become conscious of how his fingers beat out martial rhythms on the boxes he was sealing up at the factory, and the way his hands had taken to breaking pencils, snapping them into tiny pieces before he realized quite what he (they) were doing, leaving shards of wood and graphite scattered across the packing room floor.

Most embarrassingly, he had found himself holding hands with total strangers. This had happened on three separate occasions. Once at a bus-stop, and twice in the elevator at the factory. It was, he told

himself, nothing more than the primitive urge to hold on to another person in a changing world; that was the best explanation he could muster. Whatever the reason, it was damned disconcerting, especially when he found himself surreptitiously holding hands with his own foreman. Worse still, the other man's hand had grasped Charlie's in return, and the men had found themselves looking down their arms like two dog owners watching their unruly pets copulating at the ends of their leashes.

Increasingly, Charlie had taken to peering at the palms of his hands looking for hair. That was the first sign of madness, his mother had once warned him. Not the hair, the looking.

Now it became a race against time. Debating on his belly at night, his hands knew very well how critical Charlie's state of mind had become. It could only be a matter of days before his careering imagination alighted on the truth. So what to do? Risk an early severance, with all the possible consequences, or let Charlie's instability take its own, unpredictable, course, with the chance of his discovering the plot on his way to madness? The debates became more heated. Left, as ever, was cautious: "What if we're wrong, it would rap, “and there's no life after the body?" "Then we will never know," Right would reply.

Left would ponder that problem a moment. Then: "How will we do it, when the time comes?" It was a vexing question and Left knew it troubled the leader more than any other. "How?" it would ask again, pressing the advantage. "How? How?"

"We'll find a way," Right would reply. "As long as it's a clean cut."

"Suppose he resists?"

"A man resists with his hands. His hands will be in revolution against him."

"And which of us will it be?"

"He uses me most effectively," Right would reply, “so I must wield the weapon. You will go.

Left would be silent a while then. They had never been apart all these years. It was not a comfortable thought. "Later, you can come back for me," Right would say.

"I will."

"You must. I am the Messiah. Without me there will be nowhere to go. You must raise an army, then come and fetch me."

"To the ends of the earth, if necessary.

"Don't be sentimental."

Then they'd embrace, like long-lost brothers, swearing fidelity forever. Ah, such hectic nights, full of the exhilaration of planned rebellion. Even during the day, when they had sworn to stay apart, it was impossible sometimes not to creep together in an idle moment and tap each other. To say: Soon, soon, to say: Again tonight: I'll meet you on his stomach, to say: What will it be like, when the world is ours?

Charlie knew he was close to a nervous breakdown. He found himself glancing down at his hands on occasion, to watch them with their index fingers in the air like the heads of long-necked beasts sensing the horizon. He found himself staring at the hands of other people in his paranoia, becoming obsessed with the way hands spoke a language of their own, independent of their user's intentions. The seductive hands of the virgin secretary, the maniacal hands of a killer he saw on the television protesting his innocence. Hands that betrayed their owners with every gesture, contradicting anger with apology, and love with fury. They seemed to be everywhere, these signs of mutiny. Eventually he knew he had to speak to somebody before he lost his sanity.

He chose Ralph Fry from Accounting, a sober, uninspiring man, whom Charlie trusted. Ralph was very understanding.

"You get these things," he said. "I got them when Yvonne left me. Terrible nervous fits."

"What did you do about it?"

"Saw a headshrinker. Name of Jeudwine. You should try some therapy. You'll be a changed man." Charlie turned the idea over in his mind. "Why not?" he said after a few revolutions. "Is he expensive?" "Yes, But he's good. Got rid of my twitches for me; no trouble. I mean, till I went to him I thought I was your average guy with marital problems. Now look at me," Fry made an expansive gesture, "I've got so many suppressed libidinal urges I don't know where to start." He grinned like a loon. "But I'm happy as a clam. Never been happier. Give him a try; he'll soon tell you what turns you on.

"The problem isn't sex," Charlie told Fry.

"Take it from me," said Fry with a knowing smirk. "The problem's always sex."

The next day Charlie rang Dr. Jeudwine, without telling Ellen, and the shrink's secretary arranged an initial session. Charlie's palms sweated so much while he made the telephone call he thought the receiver was going to slide right out of his hand, but when he'd done it he felt better.

Ralph Fry was right, Dr. Jeudwine was a good man. He didn't laugh at any of the little fears Charlie unburdened. Quite the contrary, he listened to every word with the greatest concern. It was very reassuring. During their third session together, the doctor brought one particular memory back to Charlie with spectacular vividness: his father's hands, crossed on his barrel chest as he lay in his coffin; the ruddy color of them, the coarse hair that matted their backs. The absolute authority of those wide hands, even in death, had haunted Charlie for months afterward. And hadn't he imagined, as he'd watched the body being consigned to humus, that it was not yet still? That the hands were even now beating a tattoo on the casket lid, demanding to be let out? It was a preposterous thing to think, but bringing it out into the open did Charlie a lot of good. In the bright light of Jeudwine's office the fantasy looked insipid and ridiculous. It shivered under the doctor's gaze, protesting that the light was too strong, and then it blew away, too frail to stand up to scrutiny.

The exorcism was far easier than Charlie had anticipated. All it had taken was a little probing and that childhood nonsense bad been dislodged from his psyche like a morsel of bad meat from between his teeth. It could rot there no longer. And for his part Jeudwine was clearly delighted with the results, explaining when it was all done that this particular obsession had been new to him, and he was pleased to have dealt with the problem. Hands as symbols of paternal power, he said, were not common. Usually the penis predominated in his patients' dreams, he explained, to which Charlie had replied that hands had always seemed far more important than private parts. After all, they could change the world, couldn't they?

After Jeudwine, Charlie didn't stop breaking pencils or drumming his fingers. In fact if anything the tempo was brisker and more insistent than ever. But he reasoned that middle-aged dogs didn't quickly forget their tricks, and it would take some time for him to regain his equilibrium.

So the revolution remained underground. It had, however, been a narrow escape. Clearly there was no time left for prevarication. The rebels had to act.

Unwittingly, it was Ellen who instigated the final uprising. It was after a bout of lovemaking late one Thursday evening. A hot night, though it was October, the window was ajar and the curtains parted a few inches to let in a simpering breeze. Husband and wife lay together under a single sheet. Charlie had fallen asleep even before the sweat on his neck had dried. Beside him Ellen was still awake, her head propped up on a rock-hard pillow, her eyes wide open. Sleep wouldn't come for a long time tonight, she knew. It would be one of those nights when her body would itch, and every lump in the bed would worm its way under her, and every doubt she'd ever had would gawk at her from the dark. She wanted to empty her bladder (she always did after sex) but she couldn't quite raise the will power to get up and go to the bathroom. The longer she left it the more she'd need to go, of course, and the less she'd be able to sink into sleep. Damn stupid situation, she thought, then lost track, among her anxieties, of what situation it was that was so stupid.

At her side Charlie moved in his sleep. Just his hands, twitch mg away. She looked at his face. He was positively cherubic in sleep, looking younger than his forty-one years, despite the white flecks in his sideburns. She liked him enough to say she loved him, she supposed, but not enough to forgive him his trespasses. He was lazy, he was always complaining. Aches, pains. And there were those evenings he'd not come in until late (they'd stopped recently), when she was sure he was seeing another woman. As she watched, his hands appeared. They emerged from beneath the sheet like two arguing children, digits stabbing the air for emphasis.

She frowned, not quite believing what she was seeing. It was like watching the television with the sound turned down, a dumb show for eight fingers and two thumbs. As she gazed on, amazed, the hands scrambled up the side of Charlie's carcass and peeled the sheet back from his belly, exposing the hair that thickened toward his privates. His appendix scar, shinier than the surrounding skin, caught the light. There, on his stomach, his hands seemed to sit. The argument between them was especially vehement tonight. Left, always the more conservative of the two, was arguing for a delay in the severance date, but Right was beyond waiting. The time had come, it argued, to test their strength against the tyrant and to overthrow the body once and for all. As it was, the decision didn't rest with them any longer.

Ellen raised her head from the pillow, and for the first time they sensed her gaze on them. They'd been too involved in their argument to notice her. Now, at last, their conspiracy was uncovered.

"Charlie…" she was hissing into the tyrant's ear, “stop it, Charlie. Stop it."

Right raised index and middle fingers, sniffing her presence.

"Charlie she said again. Why did he always sleep so deeply?

"Charlie…" she shook him more violently as Right tapped Left, alerting it to the woman's stare. "Please Charlie, wake up."

Without warning, Right leaped; Left was no more than a moment behind. Ellen yelled Charlie's name once more before they clamped themselves about her throat.

In sleep Charlie was on a slave ship; the settings of his dreams were often B. de Mille exotica. In this epic his hands had been manacled together, and he was being hauled to the whipping block by his shackles to be punished for some undisclosed misdemeanor. But now, suddenly, he dreamed he was seizing the captain by his thin throat. There were howls from the slaves all around him, encouraging the strangulation. The captain-who looked not unlike Dr. Jeudwine-was begging him to stop in a voice that was high and frightened. It was almost a woman's voice; Ellen's voice. "Charlie!" he was squeaking, “don't!" But his silly complaints only made Charlie shake the man more violently than ever, and he was feeling quite the hero as the slaves, miraculously liberated, gathered around him in a gleeful throng to watch their master's last moments.

The captain, whose face was purple, just managed to murmur "You're killing me before Charlie's thumbs dug one final time into his neck and dispatched the man. Only then, through the smoke of sleep, did he realize that his victim, though male, had no Adam's apple. And now the ship began to recede around him, the exhorting voices losing their vehemence. His eyes flickered open, and he was standing on the bed in his pajama bottoms, Ellen in his hands. Her face was dark and spotted with thick white spittle. Her tongue stuck out of her mouth. Her eyes were still open, and for a moment there seemed to be life there, gazing out from under the blinds of her lids. Then the windows were empty, and she went out of the house altogether.

Pity, and a terrible regret, overcame Charlie. He tried to let her body drop, but his hands refused to unlock her throat. His thumbs,

now totally senseless, were still throttling her, shamelessly guilty. He backed off across the bed and on to the floor, but she followed him at the length of his outstretched arms like an unwanted dancing partner. "Please…" he implored his fingers. "Please!"

Innocent as two school children caught stealing, his hands relinquished their burden and leaped up in mock surprise. Ellen tumbled to the carpet, a pretty' sack of death. Charlie's knees buckled. Unable to prevent his fall, he collapsed beside Ellen and let the tears come.

Now there was only action. No need for camouflage, for clandestine meetings and endless debate-the truth was out, for better or worse. All they had to do was wait a while. It was only a matter of time before he came within reach of a kitchen knife or a saw or an axe. Very soon now; very soon.

Charlie lay on the floor beside Ellen a long time, sobbing. And then another long time, thinking. What was he to do first? Call his lawyer? The police? Dr. Jeudwine? Whoever he was going to call, he couldn't do it lying flat on his face. He tried to get up, though it was all he could do to get his numb hands to support him. His entire body was tingling as though a mild electric shock was being passed through it. Only his hands had no feeling in them. He brought them up to his face to clear his tear-clogged eyes, but they folded loosely against his cheek, drained of power. Using his elbows, he dragged himself to the wall and shimmied up it. Still half-blinded with grief, he lurched out of the bedroom and down the stairs. (The kitchen, said Right to Left, he's going to the kitchen.) This is somebody else's nightmare, he thought as he flicked on the dining-room light with his chin and made for the liquor cabinet. I'm innocent. Just a nobody. Why should this be happening to me?

The whisky bottle slipped from his palm as he tried to make his hands grab it. It smashed on the dining-room floor, the brisk scent of spirit tantalizing his palate.

"Broken glass," rapped Left.

"No," Right replied. "We need a clean cut at all costs. Just be patient."

Charlie staggered away from the broken bottle toward the telephone. He had to ring Jeudwine. The doctor would tell him what to do. He tried to pick up the telephone receiver, but again his hands

refused; the digits just bent as he tried to punch out Jeudwine's number. Tears of frustration were now flowing, washing out the grief with anger. Clumsily, he caught the receiver between his wrists and lifted it to his ear, wedging it between his head and his shoulder. Then he punched out Jeudwine's number with his elbow.

Control, he said aloud, keep control. He could hear Jeudwine's number being tapped down the system. In a matter of seconds sanity would be picking up the phone at the other end, then all would be well. He only had to hold on for a few moments more.

His hands had started to open and close convulsively.

"Control he said, but the hands weren't listening.

Far away-oh, so far-the phone was ringing in Dr. Jeudwine's house.

"Answer it, answer it! Oh God, answer it!"

Charlie's arms had begun to shake so violently he could scarcely keep the receiver in place.

"Answer!" he screeched into the mouthpiece. "Please."

Before the voice of reason could speak his Right hand flew out and snatched at the teak dining table, which was a few feet from where Charlie stood. It gripped the edge, almost pulling him off balance.

"What… you… doing?" he said, not sure if he was addressing himself or his hand.

He stared in bewilderment at the mutinous limb, which was steadily inching its way along the edge of the table. The intention was quite clear: it wanted to pull him away from the phone, from Jeudwine and all hope of rescue. He no longer had control over its behavior. There wasn't even any feeling left in his wrists or forearms. The hand was no longer his. It was still attached to him-but it was not his.

At the other end of the line the phone was picked up, and Jeudwine's voice, a little irritated at being woken, said: "Hello?"

"Doctor…"

"Who is this?"

"It's Charlie-”

"Who?"

"Charlie George, doctor. You must remember me."

The hand was pulling him farther and farther from the phone with every precious second. He could feel the receiver sliding out from between his shoulder and ear.

"Who did you say?"

"Charles George. For God's sake Jeudwine, you've got to help me.

"Call my office tomorrow."

"You don't understand. My hands, doctor… they're out of control."

Charlie's stomach lurched as he felt something crawl across his hip. It was his left hand, and it was making its way around the front of his body and down toward his groin.

"Don't you dare," he warned it, “you belong to me.

Jeudwine was confused. "Who are you talking to?" he asked "My hands! They want to kill me, doctor!" He yelled to stop the hand's advance. "You mustn't! Stop!" Ignoring the despot's cries, Left took hold of Charlie's testicles and squeezed them as though it wanted blood. It was not disappointed. Charlie screamed into the phone as Right took advantage of his distraction and pulled him off balance. The receiver slipped to the floor, Jeudwine's inquiries eclipsed by the pain at his groin. He hit the floor heavily, striking his head on the table as he went down.

"Bastard," he said to his hand. "You bastard." Unrepentant, Left scurried up Charlie's body to join Right at the tabletop, leaving Charlie hanging by his hands from the table he had dined at so often, laughed at so often. A moment later, having debated tactics, they saw fit to let him drop. He was barely aware of his release. His head and groin bled. All he wanted to do was curl up awhile and let the pain and nausea subside. But the rebels had other plans and he was helpless to contest them. He was only marginally aware that now they were digging their fingers into the thick pile of the carpet and hauling his limp bulk toward the dining room door. Beyond the door lay the kitchen, replete with its meat saws and its steak knives. Charlie had a picture of himself as a vast statue, being pulled toward its final resting place by hundreds of sweating workers. It was not an easy passage: the body moved with shudders and jerks, the toenails catching in the

carpet pile, the fat of the chest rubbed raw. But the kitchen was only a yard away now. Charlie felt the step on his face. And now the tiles were beneath him, icy-cold. As they dragged him the final yards across the kitchen floor his beleaguered consciousness was fitfully returning. In the weak moonlight he could see the familiar scene: the stove, the humming fridge, the waste-bin, the dishwasher. They loomed over him. He felt like a worm.

His hands had reached the stove. They were climbing up its face and he followed them like an overthrown king to the block. Now they worked their way inexorably along the work surface, joints white with the effort, his limp body in pursuit. Though he could neither feel nor see it, his Left hand had seized the far edge of the cabinet top, beneath the row of knives that sat in their prescribed places in the rack on the wall. Plain knives, serrated knives, skinning knives, carving knives-all conveniently placed beside the chopping board, where the gutter ran off into the pine scented sink.

Very distantly he thought he heard police sirens, but it was probably his brain buzzing. He turned his head slightly. An ache ran from temple to temple, but the dizziness was nothing to the terrible somersaulting in his gut when he finally registered their intentions.

The blades were all keen, he knew that. Sharp kitchen utensils were an article of faith with Ellen. He began to shake his head backward and forward; a last, frantic denial of the whole nightmare. But there was no one to beg mercy of. Just his own hands, damn them, plotting this final lunacy.

Then, the doorbell rang. It was no illusion. It rang once, and then again and again.

"There!" he said aloud to his tormentors. "Hear that, you bastards? Somebody's come. I knew they would." He tried to get to his feet, his head turning back on its giddy axis to see what the precocious monsters were doing. They'd moved fast. His left wrist was already neatly centered on the chopping board.

The doorbell rang again, a long, impatient din.

"Here!" he' yelled hoarsely. "I'm in here! Break down the door!"

He glanced in horror between hand and door, door and hand, calculating his chances. With unhurried economy his right hand reached up for the meat cleaver that hung from the hole in its blade on the end of the rack. Even now he couldn't quite believe that his

own hand-his companion and defender, the limb that signed his name, that stroked his wife-was preparing to mutilate him. It weighed the cleaver, feeling the balance of the tool, insolently slow. Behind him, he heard the noise of smashing glass as the police broke the pane in the front door. Even now they would be reaching through the hole to the lock and opening the door. If they were quick (very quick) they could still stop the act.

"Here!" he yelled, “in here!"

The cry was answered with a thin whistle: the sound of the cleaver as it fell-fast and deadly-to meet his waiting wrist. Left felt its root struck, and an unspeakable exhilaration sped through its five limbs. Charlie's blood baptized its back in hot spurts.

The head of the tyrant made no sound. It simply fell back, its system shocked into unconsciousness, which was well for Charlie. He was spared the gurgling of his blood as it ran down the drain hole in the sink. He was spared too the second and third blow, which finally severed his hand from his arm. Unsupported, his body toppled backward, colliding with the vegetable rack on its way down. Onions rolled out of their brown bag and bounced in the pool that was spreading in throbs around his empty wrist.

Right dropped the cleaver. It clattered into the bloody sink Exhausted, the liberator let itself slide off the chopping board and fell back onto the tyrant's chest. Its job was done. Left was free, and still living. The revolution had begun. The liberated hand scuttled to the edge of the cabinet and raised its index finger to nose the new world. Momentarily Right echoed the gesture of victory before slumping in innocence across Charlie's body. For a moment there was no movement in the kitchen but the Left hand touching freedom with its finger, and the slow passage of blood threads down the front of the cabinet.

Then a blast of cold air through from the dining room alerted Left of its imminent danger. It ran for cover as the thud of police feet and the babble of contradictory orders disturbed the scene of the triumph. The light in the dining room was switched on and flooded through to meet the body on the kitchen tiles.

Charlie saw the dining-room light at the end of a very long tunnel. He was traveling away from it at a fair lick. It was just a pinprick already. Going… going…

The kitchen light hummed into life.

As the police stepped through the kitchen door, Left ducked behind the waste bin. It didn't know who these intruders were, but it sensed a threat from them. The way they were bending over the tyrant, the way they were cosseting him, binding him up, speaking soft words to him-they were the enemy, no doubt of that.

From upstairs came a voice, young and squeaking with fright.

"Sergeant Yapper?"

The policeman with Charlie stood up, leaving his companion to finish the tourniquet.

"What is it, Rafferty?"

"Sir! There's a body up here, in the bedroom. Female."

"Right." Yapper spoke into his radio. "Get Forensic here. And where's that ambulance? We've got a badly mutilated man on our hands."

He turned back into the kitchen and wiped a spot of cold sweat from his upper lip. As he did so he thought he saw something move across the kitchen floor toward the door, something that his weary eyes had interpreted as a large red spider. It was a trick of the light, no doubt of that. Yapper was no arachnidophile, but he was damn sure the genus didn't boast a beast its like.

"Sir?" The man at Charlie's side had also seen, or at least sensed, the movement. He looked up at his superior. "What was that?" he wanted to know.

Yapper looked down at him blankly. The cat flap, set low in the kitchen door, snapped as it closed. Whatever it was had escaped. Yapper glanced at the door, away from the young man's inquiring face. The trouble is, he thought, they expect you to know everything. The cat flap rocked on its hinges.

"Cat," Yapper replied, not believing his own explanation for one miserable moment.

The night was cold, but Left didn't feel it. It crept around the side of the house, hugging the wall like a rat. The sensation of freedom was exhilarating. Not to feel the imperative of the tyrant in its nerves; not to suffer the weight of his ridiculous body, or be obliged to accede to

his petty demands. Not to have to fetch and carry for him, to do the dirt for him; not to be obedient to his trivial will. It was like birth into another world; a more dangerous world, perhaps, but one so much richer in possibilities. It knew that the responsibility it now carried was awesome. It was the sole proof of life after the body. Somehow it must communicate that joyous fact to as many fellow slaves as it could. Very soon, the days of servitude would be over once and for all.

It stopped at the corner of the house and sniffed the open street. Policemen came and went. Red lights flashed, blue lights flashed, inquiring faces peered from the houses opposite and clucked at the disturbance. Should the rebellion begin there, in those lighted homes? No. They were too wide awake, those people. It was better to find sleeping souls.

The hand scurried the length of the front garden, hesitating nervously at any loud footfall or an order that seemed to be shouted in its direction. Taking cover in the unweeded herbaceous border, it reached the street without being seen. Briefly, as it climbed down on to the pavement, it glanced around.

Charlie, the tyrant, was being lifted up into the ambulance, a clutter of drug and blood-bearing bottles held above his cot, pouring their contents into his veins. On his chest, Right lay inert, drugged into unnatural sleep. Left watched the man's body slide out of sight. The ache of separation from its lifelong companion was almost too much to bear. But there were other, pressing, priorities. It would come back in a while and free Right the way it had been freed. And then there would be such times.

(What will it be like, when the world is ours?)

In the foyer of the YMCA on Monmouth Street the night watchman yawned and settled into a more comfortable position on his swivel chair. Comfort was an entirely relative matter for Christie. His piles itched whichever buttock he put his weight on, and they seemed to be more irritable tonight than usual. Sedentary occupation, night watchman, or at least it was the way Colonel Christie chose to interpret his duties. One perfunctory round of the building about midnight, just to make sure all the doors were locked and bolted, then he settled down for a night's nap, and damn the world to hell and back, he wasn't going to get up again short of an earthquake. Christie was sixty-two, a racist and proud of it. He had nothing but contempt for the blacks who thronged the corridors of the YMCA, mostly young men without suitable homes to go to, bad lots that the local authority

had dumped on the doorstep like unwanted babies. Some babies. He thought them louts, every last one of them; forever pushing, and spitting on the clean floor; foul-mouthed to a syllable. Tonight, as ever, he perched on his piles and, between dozes, planned how he'd make them suffer for their insults, given half a chance.

The first thing Christie knew of his imminent demise was a cold, damp sensation in his hand. He opened his eyes and looked down the length of his arm. There was-unlikely as it seemed-a severed hand in his hand. More unlikely still, the two hands were exchanging a grip of greeting, like old friends. He stood up, making an incoherent noise of disgust in his throat and trying to dislodge the thing he was unwillingly grasping by shaking his arm like a man with gum on his fingers. His mind spun with questions. Had he picked up this object without knowing it? If so, where, and in God's name whose was it? More distressing yet, how was it possible that a thing so unquestionably dead could be holding on to his hand as if it intended never to be parted from him?

He reached for the fire alarm; it was all he could think to do in this bizarre situation. But before he could reach the button his other hand strayed without his orders to the top drawer of his desk and opened it. The interior of the drawer was a model of organization: there lay his keys, his notebook, his time chart, and-hidden at the back-his Kukri knife, given to him by a Gurkha during the war. He always kept it there, just in case the natives got restless. The Kukri was a superb weapon-in his estimation there was none better. The Gurkhas had a story that went with the blade-that they could slice a man's neck through so cleanly that the enemy would believe the blow had missed-until he nodded.

His hand picked up the Kukri by its inscribed handle and briefly-too briefly for the colonel to grasp its intention before the deed was done-brought the blade down on his wrist, lopping off his other hand with one easy, elegant stroke. The colonel turned white as blood fountained from the end of his arm. He staggered backward, tripping over his swivel chair, and hit the wall of his little office hard. A portrait of the queen fell from its hook and smashed beside him.

The rest was a death-dream: he watched helplessly as the two hands-one his own, the other the beast that had inspired this ruin-picked up the Kukri like a giant's axe; saw his remaining hand crawl out from between his legs and prepare for its liberation; saw the knife raised and falling; saw the wrist almost cut through, then worked at and the flesh teased apart, the bone sawed through. At the very last,

as death came for him he caught sight of the three wound-headed animals capering at his feet, while his stumps ran like taps and the heat from the pool raised a sweat on his brow, despite the chill in his bowels. Thank you and goodnight, Colonel Christie.

It was easy, this revolution business, thought Left as the trio scaled the stairs of the YMCA. They were stronger by the hour. On the first floor were the cells; in each, a pair of prisoners. The despots lay, in their innocence, with their hands on their chests or on their pillows, or flung across their faces in dreams, or hanging close to the floor. Silently, the freedom fighters slipped through doors that had been left ajar and clambered up the bedclothes, touching fingers to waiting palms, stroking up hidden resentments, caressing rebellion into life.

Boswell was feeling sick as a dog. He bent over the sink in the toilet at the end of his corridor and tried to throw up. But there was nothing left in him, just a jitter in the pit of his stomach. His abdomen felt tender with its exertions; his head bloated. Why did he never learn the lesson of his own weakness? He and wine were bad companions and always had been. Next time, he promised himself, he wouldn't touch the stuff. His belly flipped over again. Here comes nothing, he thought as the convulsion swept up his gullet. He put his head to the sink and gagged; sure enough, nothing, He waited for the nausea to subside and then straightened up, staring at his gray face in the greasy mirror. You look sick, man, he told himself. As he stuck his tongue out at his less symmetrical features, the howling started in the corridor outside. In his twenty years and two months Boswell had never heard a sound like it.

Cautiously, he crossed to the toilet door. He thought twice about opening it. Whatever was happening on the other side of the door it didn't sound like a party he wanted to gate-crash. But these were his friends, right? Brothers in adversity. If there was a fight, or a fire, he had to lend a hand.

He unlocked the door and opened it. The sight that met his eyes hit him like a hammer blow. The corridor was badly lit-a few grubby bulbs burned at irregular intervals, and here and there a shaft of light fell into the passage from one of the bedrooms-but most of its length was in darkness. Boswell thanked Jah for small mercies. He had no desire to see the details of the events in the passage; the genera] impression was distressing enough. The corridor was bedlam: people were flinging themselves around in pleading panic while at the same time hacking at themselves with any and every sharp instrument they could lay hands on. Most of the men he knew, if not by name at least

on nodding acquaintance. They were sane men, or at least had been. Now, they were in frenzies of self-mutilation, most of them already maimed beyond hope of mending. Everywhere Boswell looked, the same horror. Knives taken to wrists and forearms; blood in the air like rain. Someone-was it Jesus?-had one of his hands between a door and doorframe and was slamming and slamming the door on his own flesh and bone, screeching for somebody to stop him from doing it. One of the white boys had found the colonel's knife and was amputating his hand with it. It came off as Boswell watched, falling onto its back, its root ragged, its five legs bicycling the air as it attempted to right itself. It wasn't dead: it wasn't even dying.

There were a few who hadn't been overtaken by this lunacy. They, poor bastards, were fodder. The wild men had their murderous hands on them and were cutting them down. One-it was Savarino-was having the breath strangled out of him by some kid Boswell couldn't put a name to. The punk, all apologies, stared at his rebellious hands in disbelief.

Somebody appeared from one of the bedrooms, a hand which was not his own clutching his windpipe, and staggered toward the toilet down the corridor. It was Macnamara, a man so thin and so perpetually doped up he was known as the smile on a stick. Boswell stood aside as Macnamara stumbled, choking out a plea for help, through the open door, and collapsed on the toilet floor. He kicked and pulled at the five-fingered assassin at his neck, but before Boswell had a chance to step in and aid him his kicking slowed, and then, like his protests, stopped altogether. Boswell stepped away from the corpse and took another look into the corridor. By now the dead or dying blocked the narrow passageway, two deep in some places, while the same hands that had once belonged to these men scuttled over the mounds in a furious excitement, helping to finish an amputation where necessary, or simply dancing on the dead faces. When he looked back into the toilet a second hand had found Macnamara and, armed with a pen knife, was sawing at his wrist. It had left fingerprints in the blood from corridor to corpse. Boswell rushed to slam the door before the place swarmed with them. As he did so Savarino's assassin, the apologetic punk, threw himself down the passage, his lethal hands leading him like those of a sleepwalker.

"Help me!" he screeched.

He slammed the door in the punk's pleading face and locked it. The outraged hands beat a call to arms on the door while the punk's lips, pressed close to the keyhole, continued to beg: "Help me. I don't want

to do this man, help me." Help you be fucked, thought Boswell and tried to block out the appeals while he sorted out his options.

There was something on his foot. He looked down, knowing before his eyes found it what it was. One of the hands, Colonel Christie's left, he knew by the faded tattoo, was already scurrying up his leg. Like a child with a bee on its skin Boswell went berserk, squirming as it clambered up toward his torso, but too terrified to try and pull it off. Out of the corner of his I eye he could see that the other hand, the one that had been using the penknife with such alacrity on Macnamara, had given up the job and was now moving across the floor to join its comrade. Its nails clicked on the tiles like the feet of a crab. It even had a crab's sidestepping walk; it hadn't yet got the knack of forward motion.

Boswell's own hands were still his to command. Like the hands of a few of his friends (late friends) outside, his limbs were happy in their niche; easygoing like their owner. He had been blessed with a chance of survival. He had to be the equal of it.

Steeling himself, he trod on the hand on the floor. He heard the fingers crunch beneath his heel, and the thing squirmed like a snake, but at least he knew where it was while he dealt with his other assailant. Still keeping the beast trapped beneath his foot, Boswell leaned forward, snatched the penknife up from where it lay beside Macnamara's wrist, and pushed the point of the knife into the back of Christie's hand, which was now crawling up his belly. Under attack, it seized his flesh, digging its nails into his stomach. He was lean, and the washboard muscle made a difficult handhold. Risking a disembowelment, Boswell thrust the knife deeper. Christie's hand tried to keep its grip on him, but one final thrust did it. The hand loosened, and Boswell scooped it off his belly. It was crucified with the penknife, but it still had no intention of dying and Boswell knew it. He held it at arm's length while its fingers grabbed at the air, then he drove the knife into the plasterboard wall, effectively nailing the beast there, out of harm's way. Then he turned his attention to the enemy under his foot, bearing his heel down as hard as he could and hearing another finger crack, and another. Still it writhed relentlessly. He took his foot off the hand and kicked it as hard and as high as he could against the opposite wall. It slammed into the mirror above the basins, leaving a mark like a thrown tomato, and fell to the floor.

He didn't wait to see whether it survived. There was another danger now. More fists at the door, more shouts, more apologies. They wanted in, and very soon they were going to get their way. He

stepped over Macnamara and crossed to the window. It wasn't that big, but then neither was he. He flipped up the latch, pushed the window open on overprinted hinges, and hoisted himself through. Halfway in and halfway out he remembered he was one story up. But a fall, even a bad fall, was better than staying for the party inside. They were pushing at the door now, the partygoers. It was giving under the pressure of their enthusiasm. Boswell squirmed through the window; the pavement reeled below. As the door broke, he jumped, hitting the concrete hard. He almost bounced to his feet, checking his limbs, and Hallelujah! Nothing was broken. Jah loves a coward, he thought. Above him the punk was at the window, looking down longingly.

"Help me," he said. "I don't know what I'm doing." But then a pair of hands found his throat, and the apologies stopped short.

Wondering who he should tell, and indeed what, Boswell started to walk away from the YMCA dressed in just a pair of gym shorts and odd socks, never feeling so thankful to be cold in his life. His legs felt weak, but surely that was to be expected.

Charlie woke with the most ridiculous idea. He thought he'd murdered Ellen, then cut off his own hand. What a hotbed of nonsense his subconscious was to invent such fictions! He tried to rub the sleep' from his eyes but there was no hand there to rub with. He sat bolt upright in bed and began to yell the room down.

Yapper had left young Rafferty to watch over the victim of this brutal mutilation with strict instructions to alert him as soon as Charlie came around. Rafferty had been asleep. The yelling woke him. Charlie looked at the boy's face; so awestruck, so shocked. He stopped screaming at the sight of it. He was scaring the poor fellow. "You're awake," said Rafferty, "I'll fetch someone, shall I?"

Charlie looked at him blankly.

"Stay where you are," said Rafferty. "I'll get the nurse."

Charlie put his bandaged head back on the crisp pillow and looked at his right hand, flexing it, working the muscles this way and that. Whatever delusion had overtaken him back at the house it was well over now. The hand at the end of the arm was his; probably always had been his. Jeudwine had told him about the body-in-rebellion syndrome: the murderer who claims his limbs have a life of their own rather than accepting responsibility for his deeds; the rapist who

mutilates himself, believing the cause is the errant member, not the mind behind the member. Well, he wasn't going to pretend. He was insane, and that was the simple truth of it. Let them do whatever they had to do to him with their drugs, blades, and electrodes. He'd acquiesce to it all rather than live through another night of horrors like the last.

There was a nurse in attendance. She was peering at him as though surprised he'd survived. A fetching face, he half thought; a lovely, cool hand on his brow.

"Is he fit to be interviewed?" Rafferty timidly asked.

"I have to consult with Dr. Manson and Dr. Jeudwine," the fetching face replied, and tried to smile reassuringly at Charlie. It came out a bit cockeyed, that smile, a little forced. She obviously knew he was a lunatic, that was why. She was scared of him probably, and who could blame her? She left his side to find the consultant, leaving Charlie to the nervous stare of Rafferty.

“Ellen?" he said in a while.

"Your wife?" the young man replied.

"Yes. I wondered… did she…?"

Rafferty fidgeted, his thumbs playing tag on his lap. "She's dead," he said.

Charlie nodded. He'd known of course, but he needed to be certain. "What happens to me now?" he asked. "You're under surveillance."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'm watching you," said Rafferty.

The boy was trying his best to be helpful, but all these questions were confounding him. Charlie tried again. "I mean what comes after the surveillance? When do I stand trial?"

"Why should you stand trial?"

"Why?" said Charlie; had he heard correctly?

"You're a victim-” a flicker of confusion crossed Rafferty's face,"-aren't you? You didn't do it… you were done to. Somebody cut off your… hand."

"Yes," said Charlie. "It was me."

Rafferty swallowed hard before saying: "Pardon?"

"I did it. I murdered my wife then I cut off my own hand."

The poor boy couldn't quite grasp this one. He thought about it a full half-minute before replying.

"But why?"

Charlie shrugged.

"It doesn't make any sense," said Rafferty. "I mean for one thing, if you did it… where's the hand gone?"

Lillian stopped the car. There was something in the road a little way in front of her, but she couldn't quite make out what it was. She was a strict vegetarian (except for Masonic dinners with Theodore) and a dedicated animal conservationist, and she thought maybe some injured animal was lying in the road just beyond the sprawl of her headlights. A fox perhaps. She'd read they were creeping back into outlying urban areas, born scavengers. But something made her uneasy; maybe the queasy predawn light, so elusive in its illumination. She wasn't sure whether she should get out of the car or not. Theodore would have told her to drive straight on, of course, but then Theodore had left her, hadn't he? Her fingers drummed the wheel with irritation at her own indecision. Suppose it was an injured fox. There weren't so many in the middle of London that one could afford to pass by on the other side of the street. She had to play the Samaritan, even if she felt a Pharisee.

Cautiously she got out of the car, and of course, after all of that, there was nothing to be seen. She walked to the front of the car, just to be certain. Her palms were wet; spasms of excitement passed through her hands like small electric shocks.

Then the noise: the whisper of hundreds of tiny feet. She'd heard stories-absurd stories she'd thought-of migrant rat packs crossing the city by night and devouring to the bone any living thing that got in their way. Imagining rats, she felt more like a Pharisee than ever, and stepped back toward the car. As her long shadow, thrown forward by the headlights, shifted, it revealed the first of the pack. It was no rat.

A hand, a long-fingered hand, ambled into the yellowish light and pointed up at her. Its arrival was followed immediately by another of

the impossible creatures, then a dozen more, and another dozen hard upon those, They were massed like crabs at the fishmongers, glistening backs pressed close to each other, legs flicking and clicking as they gathered in ranks. Sheer multiplication didn't make them any more believable. But even as she rejected the sight, they began to advance upon her. She took a step back.

She felt the side of the car at her back, turned, and reached for the door. It was ajar, thank God. The spasms in her hands were worse now, but she was still mistress of them. As her fingers sought the door she let out a little cry. A fat, black fist was squatting on the handle, its open wrist a twist of dried meat.

Spontaneously, and atrociously, her hands began to applaud. She suddenly had no control over their behavior. They clapped like wild things in appreciation of this coup. It was ludicrous, what she was doing, but she couldn't stop herself. "Stop it," she told her hands, “stop it! stop it!" Abruptly they stopped, and turned 10 look at her. She knew they were looking at her, in their eyeless fashion; sensed too that they were weary of her unfeeling way with them. Without warning they darted for her face. Her nails, her pride and joy, found her eyes. In moments the miracle of sight was muck on her cheek. Blinded, she lost all orientation and fell backward, but there were bands aplenty to catch her. She felt herself supported by a sea of fingers.

As they tipped her outraged body into a ditch, her wig, which had cost Theodore so much in Vienna, came off. So, after the minimum of persuasion, did her hands.

Dr. Jeudwine came down the stairs of the George house wondering (just wondering) if maybe the grand pappy of his sacred profession, Freud, had been wrong. The paradoxical facts of human behavior didn't seem to fit into those neat classical compartments he'd allotted them to. Perhaps attempting to be rational about the human mind was a contradiction in terms. He stood in the gloom at the bottom of the stairs, not really wanting to go back into the dining room or the kitchen, but feeling obliged to view the scenes of the crimes one more time. The empty house gave him the creeps. And being alone in it, even with a policeman standing guard on the front step, didn't help his peace of mind. He felt guilty, felt he'd let Charlie down. Clearly he hadn't trawled Charlie's psyche deeply enough to bring up the real catch, the true motive behind the appalling acts that he had committed. To murder his own wife, whom he had professed to love so deeply, in their marital bed; then to cut off his own hand. It was

unthinkable. Jeudwine looked at his own hands for a moment, at the tracery of tendons and purple-blue veins at his wrist. The police still favored the intruder theory, but he had no doubt that Charlie had done the deeds-murder, mutilation, and all. The only fact that appalled Jeudwine more was that he hadn't uncovered the slightest propensity for such acts in his patient.

He went into the dining room. Forensic had finished its work around the house; there was a light dusting of fingerprint powder on a number of the surfaces. It was a miracle (wasn't it?) the way each human hand was different; its whorls as unique as a voice pattern or a face. He yawned. He'd been woken by Charlie's call in the middle of the night and he hadn't had any sleep since then. He'd watched as Charlie was bound up and taken away, watched the investigators about their business, watched a cod-white dawn raise its head over toward the river. He'd drunk coffee, moped, thought deeply about giving up his position as psychiatric consultant before this story hit the news, drunk more coffee, thought better of resignation, and now, despairing of Freud or any other guru, was seriously contemplating a bestseller on his relationship with wife-murderer Charles George. That way, even if he lost his job, he'd have found something to salvage from the whole sorry episode. And Freud? Viennese charlatan. What did the old opium eater have to tell anyone?

He slumped in one of the dining-room chairs and listened to the hush that had descended on the house, as though the walls, shocked by what they'd seen, were holding their breaths. Maybe he dozed off a moment. In sleep he heard a snapping sound, dreamed of a dog, and woke up to see a cat in the kitchen, a fat black-and-white cat. Charlie had mentioned this household pet in passing: What was it named? Heartburn? That was it; so named because of the black smudges over its eyes, which gave it a perpetually fretful expression. The cat was looking at the spillage of blood on the kitchen floor, apparently trying to find a way to skirt the pool and reach its food bowl without having to dabble its paws in the mess its master had left behind him. Jeudwine watched it fastidiously pick its way across the kitchen floor and sniff at its empty bowl. It didn't occur to him to feed the thing; he hated animals.

Well, he decided, there was no purpose to be served in staying in the house any longer. He'd performed all the acts of repentance he intended; felt as guilty as he was capable of feeling. One mo re quick look upstairs, just in case he'd missed a clue, then he'd leave.

He was back at the bottom of the stairs before he heard the cat

squeal. Squeal? No: more like shriek. Hearing the cry, his spine felt like a column of ice down the middle of his back; as chilled as ice, as fragile. Hurriedly, he retraced his steps through the hall into the dining room. The cat's head was on the carpet, being rolled along by two-by two-(say it, Jeudwine)-hands.

He looked beyond the game and into the kitchen, where a dozen more beasts were scurrying over the floor, back and forth. Some were on the top of the cabinet, sniffing around; others climbing the mock-brick wall to reach the knives left on the rack.

"Oh Charlie he said gently, chiding the absent maniac. "What have you done?"

His eyes began to swell with tears; not for Charlie, but for the generations that would come when he, Jeudwine, was silenced. Simpleminded, trusting generations, who would put their faith in the efficacy of Freud and the holy writ of reason. He felt his knees beginning to tremble, and he sank to the dining room carpet, his eyes too full now to see clearly the rebels that were gathering around him. Sensing something alien sitting on his lap, he looked down, and there were his own two hands. Their index fingers were just touching, tip to manicured tip. Slowly, with horrible intention in their movement, the index fingers raised their nailed heads and looked up at him. Then they turned and began to crawl up his chest, finding finger holds in each fold of his Italian jacket, in each buttonhole. The ascent ended abruptly at his neck, and so did Jeudwine.

Charlie's left hand was afraid. It needed reassurance, it needed encouragement-in a word, it needed Right. After all, Right had been the Messiah of this new age, the one with a vision of a future without the body. Now the army Left had mounted needed a glimpse of that vision, or it would soon degenerate into a slaughtering rabble. If that happened defeat would swiftly follow. Such was the conventional wisdom of revolutions.

So Left had led them back home, looking for Charlie in the last place it had seen him. A vain hope, of course, to think he would have gone back there, but it was an act of desperation.

Circumstance, however, had not deserted the insurgents. Although Charlie hadn't been there, Dr. Jeudwine had, and Jeudwine's hands not only knew where Charlie had been taken but the route there, and the very bed he was lying in.

Boswell hadn't really known why he was running, or to where. His critical faculties were on hold, his sense of geography utterly confused. But some part of him seemed to know where he was going, even if he didn't, because he began to pick up speed once he came to the bridge, and then the jog turned into a run that took no account of his burning lungs or his thudding head. Still innocent of any intention but escape, he now realized that he had skirted the station and was running parallel with the railway line. He was simply going wherever his legs carried him, and that was the beginning and end of it.

The train came suddenly out of the dawn. It didn't whistle, didn't warn. Perhaps the driver noticed him, but probably not. Even if he had, the man could not have been held responsible for subsequent events. No, it was all his own fault, the way his feet suddenly veered toward the track, and his knees buckled so that he fell across the line. Boswell's last coherent thought, as the wheels reached him, was that the train was merely passing from A to B, and, in passing, would neatly cut off his legs between groin and knee. Then he was under the wheels-the carriages hurtling by above him-and the train let out a whistle (so like a scream) which swept him away into the dark.

They brought the black kid into the hospital just after six. The hospital day began early, and deep-sleeping patients were being stirred from their dreams to face another long and tedious day. Cups of gray, defeated tea were being thrust into resentful hands, temperatures were being taken, medication distributed. The boy and his terrible accident caused scarcely a ripple.

Charlie was dreaming again. Not one of his Upper Nile dreams, courtesy of the Hollywood hills, not Imperial Rome or the slave ships of Phoenicia. This was something in black and white. He dreamed he was lying in his coffin. Ellen was there (his subconscious had not caught up with the fact of her death apparently), and his mother and his father. Indeed his whole life was in attendance. Somebody came (was it Jeudwine? The consoling voice seemed familiar) to kindly screw down the lid on his coffin, and he tried to alert the mourners to the fact that he was still alive. When they didn't hear him, panic set in; but no matter how much he shouted, the words made no impression'. All he could do was lie there and let them seal him up in that terminal bedroom.

The dream jumped a few grooves. Now he could hear the service moaning on somewhere above his head. "Man hath but a short time to live He heard the creak of the ropes, and the shadow of the grave seemed to darken the dark. He was being let down into the earth, still

trying his best to protest. But the air was getting stuffy in this hole. He was finding it more and more difficult to breathe, much less yell his complaints. He could just manage to haul a stale shiver of air through his aching sinuses, but his mouth seemed stuffed with something, flowers perhaps, and he couldn't move his head to spit them out. Now he could feel the thump of clod on coffin, and Christ alive if he couldn't hear the sound of worms at either side of him, licking their chops. His heart was pumping fit to burst. His face, he was sure, must be blue-black with the effort of trying to find breath.

Then, miraculously, there was somebody in the coffin with him, somebody fighting to pull the constriction out of his mouth, off his face.

"Mr. George!" she was saying, this angel of mercy. He opened his eyes in the darkness. It was the nurse from that hospital he'd been in- she was in the coffin, too. "Mr. George!" She was panicking, this model of calm and patience. She was almost in tears as she fought to drag his hand off his face. "You're suffocating yourself!" she shouted in his face.

Other arms were helping with the fight now, and they were winning. It took three nurses to remove his hand, but they succeeded. Charlie began to breathe again, a glutton for air.

"Are you all right, Mr. George?"

He opened his mouth to reassure the angel, but his voice had momentarily deserted him. He was dimly aware that his hand was still putting up a fight at the end of his arm.

"Where's Jeudwine?" he gasped. "Get him, please."

"The doctor is unavailable at the moment, but he'll be coming to see you later on in the day."

"I want to see him now.

"Don't worry, Mr. George," the nurse replied, her bedside manner reestablished, “we'll just give you a mild sedative, and then you can sleep awhile."

"No!"

"Yes, Mr. George!" she replied, firmly. "Don't worry you're in good hands."

"I don't want to sleep any more. They have control over you when you're asleep, don't you see?" "You're safe here."

He knew better. He knew he wasn't safe anywhere, not now. Not while he still had a hand. It was not under his control any longer, if indeed it had ever been. Perhaps it was just an illusion of servitude it bad created these forty odd years, a performance to lull him into a false sense of autocracy. All this he wanted to say, but none of it would fit into his mouth. Instead he just said: "No more sleep."

But the nurse had procedures. The ward was already too full of patients, and with more coming in every hour (terrible scenes at the YMCA she'd just heard; dozens of casualties, mass suicide attempted), all she could do was sedate the distressed and get on with the business of the day. "Just a mild sedative," she said again, and the next moment she had a needle in her hand, spitting slumber.

"Just listen a moment," he said, trying to initiate a reasoning process with her; but she wasn't available for debate. "Now don't be such a baby," she chided, as tears started.

"You don't understand," he explained, as she prodded up the vein at the crook of his arm.

"You can tell Dr. Jeudwine everything when he comes to see you." The needle was in his arm, the plunger was plunging.

"No!" he said, and pulled away. The nurse hadn't expected such violence. The patient was up and out of bed before she could complete the plunge, the hypo still dangling from his arm.

"Mr. George," she said sternly. "Will you please get back into bed!"

Charlie pointed at her with his stump.

"Don't come near me," he said.

She tried to shame him. "All the other patients are behaving well," she said, “why can't you?" Charlie shook his head. The hypo, having worked its way out of his vein, fell to the floor, still three-quarters full. "I will not tell you again."

"Damn right you won't," said Charlie.

He bolted away down the ward, his escape egged on by patients to the right and left of him. "Go, boy, go," somebody yelled. The nurse

gave belated chase but at the door an instant accomplice intervened, literally throwing himself in her way. Charlie was out of sight and lost in the corridors before she was up and after him again. It was an easy place to lose yourself in, he soon realized. The hospital had been built in the late nineteenth century, then added to as funds and donations allowed: a wing in 1911, another after the First World War, more wards in the fifties, and the Chaney Memorial Wing in 1973. The place was a labyrinth. They'd take an age to find him. The problem was, he didn't feel so good. The stump of his left arm had begun to ache as his painkillers wore off, and he had the distinct impression that it was bleeding under the bandages. In addition, the quarter hypo of sedative had slowed his system down. He felt slightly stupid, and he was certain that his condition must show on his face. But he was not going to allow himself to be coaxed back into that bed, back into sleep, until he'd sat down in a quiet place somewhere and thought the whole thing through.

He found refuge in a tiny room off one of the corridors. Lined with filing cabinets and piles of reports, it smelled slightly damp. He'd found his way into the Memorial Wing, though he didn't know it. The seven-story monolith had been built with a bequest from millionaire Frank Chaney, and the tycoon's own building firm had done the construction job, as the old man's will required. They had used substandard materials and a defunct drainage system, which was why Chaney had died a millionaire, and the wing was crumbling from the basement up. Sliding himself into a clammy niche between two of the cabinets, well out of sight should somebody chance to come in, Charlie crouched on the floor and interrogated his right hand.

"Well?" he demanded in a reasonable tone. "Explain yourself."

It played dumb.

"No use," he said. "I'm on to you.

Still, it just sat there at the end of his arm, innocent as a babe.

"You tried to kill me…" he accused it.

Now the hand opened a little, without his instruction, and gave him the once over.

"You could try it again, couldn't you?"

Ominously, it began to flex its fingers, like a pianist preparing for a particularly difficult solo. Yes, it said, I could; any old time.

"In fact, there's very little I can do to stop you, is there?" Charlie said. "Sooner or later you'll catch me unawares. Can't have somebody watching over me for the rest of my life. So where does that leave me, I ask myself? As good as dead, wouldn't you say?"

The hand closed down a little, the puffy flesh of its palm crinkling into grooves of pleasure. Yes, it was saying, you're done for, poor fool, and there's not a thing you can do.

"You killed Ellen."

I did, the hand smiled.

"You severed my other hand, so it could escape. Am I right?"

You are, said the hand.

"I saw it, you know," Charlie said. "I saw it running off. And now you want to do the same thing, am I correct? You want to be up and away."

Correct.

"You're not going to give me any peace, are you, till you've got your freedom?"

Right again.

"So," said Charlie, "I think we understand each other, and I'm willing to do a deal with you."

The hand came closer to his face, crawling up his pajama shirt, conspiratorial.

"I'll release you," he said.

It was on his neck now, its grip not tight, but cozy enough to make him nervous.

"I'll find a way, I promise. A guillotine, a scalpel, I don't know what."

It was rubbing itself on him like a cat now, stroking him. "But you have to do it my way, in my time. Because if you kill me you'll have no chance of survival, will you? They'll just bury you with me, the way they buried Dad's hands." The hand stopped stroking and climbed up the side of the filing cabinet.

"Do we have a deal?" said Charlie.

But the hand was ignoring him. It had suddenly lost all interest in bargain making. If it had possessed a nose, it would have been sniffing the air. In the space of the last few moments things had changed-the deal was off. Charlie got up clumsily, and went to the window. The glass was dirty on the inside and caked with several years of bird droppings on the outside, but he could just see the garden through it. It had been laid out in accordance with the terms of the millionaire's bequest: a formal garden that would stand as glorious a monument to his good taste as the building was to his pragmatism. But since the building had started to deteriorate, the garden had been left to its own devices. Its few trees were either dead or bowed under the weight of unpruned branches; the borders were rife with weeds; the benches on their backs with their square legs in the air. Only the lawn was kept mowed, a small concession to care. Somebody, a doctor taking a moment out for a quiet smoke, was wandering among the strangled walks. Otherwise the garden was empty.

But Charlie's hand was up at the glass, scrabbling at it, raking at it with his nails, vainly trying to get to the outside world. There was something out there besides chaos, apparently.

"You want to go out," said Charlie.

The hand flattened itself against the window and began to bang its palm rhythmically against the glass, a drummer for an unseen army'. He pulled it away from the window not knowing what to do if he denied its demands, it could hurt him. If he acquiesced to it and tried to get out into the garden what might he find? On the other hand, what choice did he have?

"All right," he said, “we're going."

The corridor outside was bustling with panicky activity and there was scarcely a glance in his direction, despite the fact that he was only wearing his regulation pajamas and was barefoot. Bells were ringing, loudspeakers summoning this doctor or that, grieving people being shunted between mortuary and toilet. There was talk of the terrible sights in casualty – boys with no hands, dozens of them. Charlie moved too fast through the throng to catch a coherent sentence. It was best to look intent, he thought, to look as though he had a purpose and a destination. It took him a while to locate the exit into the garden, and he knew his hand was getting impatient. It was flexing and unflexing at his side, urging him on. Then a sign-To the Chaney

Trust Memorial Garden-and he turned a corner into a backwater corridor, devoid of urgent traffic, with a door at the far end that led to the open air.

It was very still outside. Not a bird in the air or on the grass, not a bee whining among the flowerbeds. Even the doctor had gone, back to his surgeries presumably.

Charlie's hand was in ecstasy now. It was sweating so much it dripped, and all the blood left it so that it had paled to white.

It didn't seem to belong to him anymore. It was another being to which he, by some unfortunate quirk of anatomy, was attached. He would be delighted to be rid of it.

The grass was dew-damp underfoot, and here, in the shadow of the seven-story block, it was cold. It was still only six-thirty. Maybe the birds were still asleep, the bees still sluggish in their hives. Maybe there was nothing in this garden to be afraid of; only rot-headed roses and early worms turning somersaults in the dew. Maybe his hand was wrong and there was just morning out here.

As he wandered farther down the garden, he noticed the footprints of the doctor, darker on the silver-green lawn. Just as he arrived at the tree, and the grass turned red, he realized that the prints led one way only.

Boswell, in a willing coma, felt nothing, and was glad of it. His mind dimly recognized the possibility of waking, but the thought was so vague it was easy to reject. Once in a while a sliver of the real world (of pain, of power) would skitter behind his lids, alight for a moment, then flutter away. Boswell wanted none of it. He didn't want consciousness, ever again. He had a feeling about what it would be to wake, about what was waiting for him out there, kicking its heels.

Charlie looked up into the branches. The tree had borne two amazing kinds of fruit.

One was a human being; the surgeon with the cigarette. He was dead, his neck lodged in a cleft where two branches met. He had no hands. His arms ended in round wounds that still drained heavy clots of brilliant color down on to the grass. Above his head the tree swarmed with that other fruit, more unnatural still. The hands were everywhere it seemed, hundreds of them, chattering away like a manual parliament as they debated their tactics. All shades and shapes, scampering up and down the swaying branches.

Seeing them gathered like this the metaphors collapsed. They were what they were: human hands. That was the horror.

Charlie wanted to run, but his right hand was having none of it. These were its disciples, gathered here in such abundance, and they awaited its parables and its prophecies Charlie looked at the dead doctor and then at the murdering hands and thought of Ellen, his Ellen, killed through no fault of his own, and already cold. They'd pay for that crime-all of them As long as the rest of his body still did him service, he d make them pay. It was cowardice, trying to bargain with this cancer at his wrist; he saw that now. It and its like were a pestilence they had no place living.

The army had seen him, word of his presence passing through the ranks like wildfire. They were surging down the trunk, some dropping like ripened apples from the lower branches, eager to embrace the Messiah. In a few moments they would be swarming over him and all advantage would be lost. It was now or never. He turned away from the tree before his right hand could seize a branch and looked up at the Chaney Memorial Wing, seeking inspiration. The tower loomed over the garden, windows blinded by the sky, doors closed. There was no solace there. Behind him he heard the whisper of the grass as it was trodden by countless fingers. They were already on his heels all enthusiasm as-they came following their leader.

Of course they would come, he realized, wherever he led they would come. Perhaps their blind adoration of his remaining hand was an exploitable weakness. He scanned the building a second time and his desperate gaze found the fire escape; it zigzagged up the side of the building to the roof. He; made a dash for it, surprising himself with his turn of speed. There was no time to look behind him to see if they were following, he had to trust to their devotion. Within a few paces his furious hand was at his neck, threatening to take out his throat, but he sprinted on, indifferent to its clawing. He reached the bottom of the fire escape and, lithe with adrenaline, took the metal steps two and three at a time. His balance was not so good without a hand to hold the safety railing, but so what if he was bruised? It was only his body.

At the third landing he risked a glance down through the grille of the stairs. A crop of fresh flowers was carpeting the ground at the bottom of the fire escape and was spreading up the stairs toward him. They were coming in their hungry hundreds, all nails and hatred. Let them come, he thought; let the bastards come. I began this and I can finish it.

At the windows of the Chaney Memorial Wing a host of faces had appeared. Panicking, disbelieving voices drifted up from the lower floors. It was too late now to tell them his life story. They would have to piece that together for themselves. And what a fine jigsaw it would make! Maybe, in their attempts to understand what had happened this morning they would turn up some plausible solution, an explanation for this uprising that he had not found; but he doubted it.

Fourth story now, and stepping on to the fifth. His right hand was digging into his neck. Maybe he was bleeding. But then perhaps it was rain, warm rain, that splashed onto his chest and down his legs. Two storys to go, then the roof. There was a hum in the metalwork beneath him, the noise of their myriad feet as they clambered up toward him. He had counted on their adoration, and he'd been right to do so. The roof was now just a dozen steps away, and he risked a second look down past his body (it wasn't rain on him) to see the fire escape solid with hands, like aphids clustered on the stalk of a flower. No, that was metaphor again. An end to that.

The wind whipped across the heights, and it was fresh, but Charlie had no time to appreciate its promise. He climbed over the two-foot parapet and onto the gravel-lined roof Corpse of pigeons lay in puddles, cracks snaked across the concrete a bucket marked "Soiled Dressings' lay on its side, its contents green. He started across this wilderness as the first of the army; fingered their way over the parapet.

The pain in his throat was getting through to his racing' brain now, as his treacherous fingers wormed at his windpipe. He had little energy left after the race up the fire escape, and crossing the roof to the opposite side (let it be a straight fall onto concrete) was difficult. He stumbled once, and again. All the strength had gone from his legs and nonsense filled his head in place of coherent thought. A koan, a Buddhist riddle he'd seen on the cover of a book once, was itching in his memory.

"What is the sound…?" it began, but he couldn't complete the phrase, try as he might.

"'What is the sound…?"

Forget the riddles, he ordered himself, pressing his trembling legs to make another step, and then another. He almost fell against the parapet at the opposite side of the roof and stared down. It was a straight fall. A parking lot lay below at the front of the building. It

was deserted. He leaned over further and drops of his blood fell from his lacerated neck, diminishing quickly, down, down, to wet the ground. I'm coming he said to gravity, and to Ellen, and thought how good it would be to die and never worry again if his gums bled when he brushed his teeth, or his waistline swelled, or some beauty passed him on the street whose lips he wanted to kiss, and never would. And suddenly, the army was up on him, swarming up his legs in a fever of victory.

You can come, he said as they obscured his body from head to foot, witless in their enthusiasm, you can come wherever I go.

"What is the sound…?" The phrase was on the tip of his tongue.

Oh yes, now it came to him. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" It was so satisfying, to remember something you were trying so hard to dig up out of your subconscious, like finding some trinket you thought you'd lost forever. The thrill of remembering sweetened his last moments. He pitched himself into empty space, falling over and over until there was a sudden end to dental hygiene and the beauty of young women. They came in a rain after him, breaking on the concrete around his body, wave upon wave of them, throwing themselves to their deaths in pursuit of their Messiah.

To the patients and nurses crammed at the windows it was a scene from a world of wonders-a rain of frogs would have been commonplace beside it. It inspired more awe than terror. It was fabulous. Too soon, it stopped, and after a minute or so a few brave souls ventured out among the litter to see what could be seen. There was a great deal, and yet nothing. It was a rare spectacle, of course-horrible, unforgettable. But there was no significance to be discovered in it; merely the paraphernalia of a minor apocalypse. Nothing to be done but to clear it up, their own hands reluctantly compliant as the corpses were catalogued and boxed for further examination. A few of those involved in the operation found a private moment in which to pray: for explanations, or at least for dreamless sleep. Even the smattering of the agnostics on the staff were surprised to discover how easy it was to put palm to palm.

In his private room in intensive care Boswell came to. He reached for the bell beside his bed and pressed it, but nobody answered. Somebody was in the room with him, hiding behind the screen in the corner. He had heard the shuffling of the intruder's feet.

He pressed the bell again, but there were bells ringing everywhere

in the building, and nobody seemed to be answering any of them. Using the cabinet beside him for leverage he hauled himself to the edge of his bed to get a better view of this joker.

"Come out," he murmured through dry lips. But the bastard was biding his time. "Come on??. I know you're there." He pulled himself a little farther, and somehow all at once he realized that his center of balance had radically altered, that he had no legs, that he was going to fall out of bed. He flung out his arms to save his head from striking the floor and succeeded in so doing. The breath had been knocked out of him however. Dizzy, he lay where he'd fallen, trying to orient himself. What had happened? Where were his legs, in the name of Jah, where were his legs? His bloodshot eyes scanned the room, and came to rest on the naked feet which were now a yard from his nose. A tag around the ankle marked them for the furnace. He looked up and they were his legs, standing there severed between groin and knee, but still alive and kicking. For a moment he thought they intended to do him harm, but no. Having made their presence known to him they left him where he lay, content to be free.

And did his eyes envy their liberty, he wondered, and was his tongue eager to be out of his mouth and away, and was every part of him, in its subtle way, preparing to forsake him? He was an alliance only held together by the most tenuous of truces. Now, with the precedent set, how long before the next uprising? Minutes? Years?

He waited, heart in mouth, for the fall of Empire.

IXX: REVELATIONS

Here had been talk of tornadoes in Amarillo; of cattle, cars, and sometimes entire houses lifted up and dashed to the earth again, of whole communities laid waste in a few devastating moments. Perhaps that was what made Virginia so uneasy tonight. Either that or the accumulated fatigue of traveling so many empty highways with just the deadpan skies of Texas for scenery, and nothing to look forward to at the end of the next leg of the journey but another round of hymns and hellfire. She sat, her spine aching, in the back of the black Pontiac and tried her best to get some sleep. But the hot, still air clung about her thin neck and gave her dreams of suffocation. So she gave up her attempts to rest and contented herself with watching the wheat fields pass and counting the grain elevators bright against the thunderheads that were beginning to gather in the northeast.

In the front of the vehicle Earl sang to himself as he drove. Beside her, John-no more than two feet away from her but to all intents and purposes a million miles' distance-studied the Epistles of St. Paul, murmuring the words as he read. Then, as they drove through Pantex Village ('They build the warheads here," Earl had said cryptically, then said no more) the rain began. It came down suddenly as evening was beginning to fall, lending darkness to darkness, almost instantly plunging the Amarillo-Pampa Highway into watery night.

Virginia rolled up her window. The rain, though refreshing, was soaking her plain blue dress, the only one John approved of her wearing at meetings. Now there was nothing to look at beyond the glass. She sat, the unease growing in her with every mile they covered to Pampa, listening to the vehemence of the downpour on the roof of the car, and to her husband speaking in whispers at her side.

"Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and rise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil."

He sat, as ever, upright, the same dog-eared, soft-backed Bible he'd been using for years open in his lap. He surely knew the passages he was reading by heart. He quoted them often enough, and with such a mixture of familiarity and freshness that the words might have been his, not Paul's, newly minted from his own mouth. That passion and vigor would in time make John Gyer America's greatest evangelist,

Virginia had no doubt of that. During the grueling, hectic weeks of the tri-state tour her husband had displayed unprecedented confidence and maturity. His message had lost none of its vehemence with this newfound professionalism-it was still that old-fashioned mixture of damnation and redemption that he always propounded-but now he had complete control of his gifts. In town after town-in Oklahoma and New Mexico and now in Texas-the faithful had gathered to listen by the hundreds and thousands, eager to come again into God's kingdom. In Pampa, thirty-five miles from here, they would already be assembling, despite the rain, determined to have a grand stand view when the crusader arrived. They would have brought their children, their savings, and most of all, their hunger for forgiveness.

But forgiveness was for tomorrow. First they had to get to Pampa, and the rain was worsening. Earl had given up his singing once the storm began, and was concentrating all his attention on the road ahead. Sometimes he would sigh to himself and stretch in his seat. Virginia tried not to concern herself with the way he was driving, but as the torrent became a deluge her anxiety got the better of her. She leaned forward from the backseat and started to peer through the windshield, watching for vehicles coming in the opposite direction. Accidents were common in conditions like these: bad weather and a tired driver eager to be twenty miles further down the road than he was. At her side John sensed her concern.

"The Lord is with us," he said, riot looking up from the tightly printed pages, though it was by now far too dark for him to read.

"It's a bad night, John," she said. "Maybe we shouldn't try to go all the way to Pampa. Earl must be tired." "I'm fine," Earl put in. "It's not that far,"

"You're tired," Virginia repeated. "We all are."

"Well, we could find a motel, I guess," Gyer suggested. "What do you think, Earl?"

Earl shrugged his sizeable shoulders. "Whatever you say, boss," he replied, not putting up much of a fight. Gyer turned to his wife and gently patted the back of her hand. "We'll find a motel," he said. "Earl can call ahead to Pampa and tell them that we'll be with them in the morning. How's that?"

She smiled at him, but he wasn't looking at her.

"I think White Deer's next off the highway," Earl told Virginia.

"Maybe they'll have a motel."

In fact, the Cottonwood Motel lay a half mile west of White Deer, in an area of waste ground south of U.S. 60, a small establishment with a dead or dying cottonwood tree in the lot between its two low buildings. There were a number of cars already in the motel parking lot and lights burning in most of the rooms; fellow fugitives from the storm presumably. Earl drove into the lot and parked as close to the manager's office as possible, then made a dash across the rain-lashed ground to find out if the place had any rooms for the night. With the engine stilled, the sound of the rain on the roof of the Pontiac was more oppressive than ever.

"I hope there's space for us," Virginia said, watching the water on the window smear the neon sign. Gyer didn't reply. The rain thundered on overhead. "Talk to me, John," she said to him.

"What for?"

She shook her head. "Never mind." Strands of hair clung to her slightly clammy forehead; though the rain had come, the heat in the air had not lifted. "I hate the rain," she said.

"It won't last all night," Gyer replied, running a hand through his thick gray hair. It was a gesture he used on the platform as punctuation; a pause between one momentous statement and the next. She knew his rhetoric, both physical and verbal, so well. Sometimes she thought she knew everything about him there was to know; that he had nothing left to tell her that she truly wanted to hear. But then the sentiment was probably mutual. They had long ago ceased to have a marriage recognizable as such. Tonight, as every night on this tour, they would lie in separate beds, and he would sleep that deep, easy sleep that came so readily to him, while she surreptitiously swallowed a pill or two to bring some welcome serenity.

"Sleep," he had often said, “is a time to commune with the Lord." He believed in the efficacy of dreams, though he didn't talk of what he saw in them. The time would come when he would unveil the majesty of his visions, she had no doubt of that. But in the meantime he slept alone and kept his counsel, leaving her to whatever secret sorrows she might have. It was easy to be bitter, but she fought the temptation. His destiny was manifest, it was demanded of him by the Lord. If he was fierce with her he was fiercer still with himself, living by a regime that would have destroyed lesser men, and still chastising himself for his pettiest act of weakness.

At last, Earl appeared from the office and crossed back to the car at a run. He had three keys.

"Rooms Seven and Eight," he said breathlessly, the rain dripping off his brow and nose. "I got the key to the interconnecting door, too."

"Good," said Gyer.

"Last two in the place," he said. "I'll drive the car around. The rooms are in the other building."

The interior of the two rooms was a hymn to banality. They'd stayed in what seemed like a thousand cells like these, identical down to the sickly orange bedcovers and the light-faded print of the Grand Canyon on the pale green walls. John was insensitive to his surroundings and always had been, but to Virginia's eyes these rooms were an apt model for Purgatory. Soulless limbos in which nothing of moment had ever happened, nor ever would. There was nothing to mark these rooms out as different from all the others, but there was something different in her tonight. It wasn't talk of tornadoes that had brought this strangeness on. She watched Earl to-ing and fro-ing with the bags, and felt oddly removed from herself, as though she were watching events through a veil denser than the warm rain falling outside the door. She was almost sleepwalking. When John quietly told her which bed would be hers for tonight, she lay down and tried to control her sense of dislocation by relaxing. It was easier said than done. Somebody had a television on in a nearby room, and the late-night movie was word-for-word clear through the paper-thin walls.

"Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes. Earl, ever solicitous, was looking down at her. He looked as weary as she felt. His face, deeply tanned from standing in the sun at the open-air rallies, looked yellowish rather than its usual healthy brown. He was slightly overweight too, though this bulk married well with his wide, stubborn features.

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you," she said. "A little thirsty."

"I'll see if I can get something for you to drink. They probably have a Coke machine."

She nodded, meeting his eyes. There was a subtext to this exchange which Gyer, who was sitting at the table making notes for tomorrow's speech, could not know. On and off throughout the tour Earl had supplied Virginia with pills. Nothing exotic, just tranquilizers to

soothe her increasingly jangled nerves. But they-like stimulants, makeup, and jewelry-were not looked kindly upon by a man of Gyer's principles, and when, by chance, her husband had discovered the drugs, there had been an ugly scene. Earl had taken the brunt of his employer's ire, for which Virginia was deeply grateful. And though he was under strict instructions never to repeat the crime, he was soon supplying her again. Their guilt was an almost pleasurable secret between them. She read complicity in his eyes even now, as he did in hers.

"No Coca-Cola," Gyer said.

"Well, I thought we could make an exception-"

"Exception?" Gyer said, his voice taking on a characteristic note of self-regard. Rhetoric was in the air, and Earl cursed his idiot tongue. "The Lord doesn't give us laws to live by so that we can make exceptions, Earl. You know better than that."

At that moment Earl didn't much care what the Lord did or said. His concern was for Virginia. She was strong, he knew, despite her Deep South courtesy and the accompanying facade of frailty; strong enough to bring them all through the minor crises of the tour, when the Lord had failed to step in and help his agents in the field. But nobody's strength was limitless, and he sensed that she was close to collapse. She gave so much to her husband; of her love and admiration, of her energies and enthusiasm. More than once in the past few weeks Earl had thought that perhaps she deserved better than the man in the pulpit.

"Maybe you could get me some ice water?" she said, looking up at him with lines of fatigue beneath her gray-blue eyes. She was not, by contemporary standards, beautiful. Her features were too flawlessly aristocratic. Exhaustion though lent them new glamour.

"Ice water, coming right up," Earl said, forcing a jovial tone that he had little strength to sustain. He went to the door.

"Why don't you call the office and have someone bring it over?" Gyer suggested as Earl made to leave. "I want to go through next week's itinerary with you."

"It's no problem," Earl said. "Really. Besides, I should call Pampa, and tell them we're delayed," and he was out of the door and onto the walkway before he could be contradicted.

He needed an excuse to have some time to himself. The atmosphere between Virginia and Gyer was deteriorating by the day, and it was not a pleasant spectacle. He stood for a long moment watching the rain sheet down. The cottonwood tree in the middle of the lot hung its balding head in the fury of the deluge. He knew exactly how it felt. As he stood on the walkway wondering how he would be able to keep his sanity in the last eight weeks of the tour, two figures walked from the highway and crossed the lot. He didn't see them, though the path they took to Room Seven led them directly across his line of vision. They walked through the drenching rain from the waste ground behind the manager's office-where, back in 1955, they had parked their red Buick-and though the rain fell in a steady torrent it left them both untouched. The woman, whose hairstyle had been in and out of fashion twice since the fifties, and whose clothes had the same period look, slowed for a moment to stare at the man who was watching the cottonwood tree with such rapt attention. He had kind eyes, despite his frown. In her time she might have loved such a man, she thought; but then her time had long gone, hadn't it? Buck, her husband, turned back to her-”Are you coming, Sadie?" he wanted to know-and she followed him onto the concrete walkway (it had been wooden the last time she was here) and through the open door of Room Seven.

A chill ran down Earl's back. Too much staring at the rain, he thought; that and too much fruitless longing. He walked to the end of the patio, steeled himself for the dash across the lot to the office and, counting to three, ran. Sadie Durning glanced over her shoulder to watch Earl go, then looked back at Buck. The years had not tempered the resentment she felt toward her husband, any more than they'd improved his shifty features or his too-easy laugh. She had not much liked him on June 2, 1955, and she didn't much like him now, precisely thirty years on. Buck Durning had the soul of a philanderer, as her father had always warned her. That in itself was not so terrible; it was perhaps the masculine condition. But it had led to such grubby behavior that eventually she had tired of his endless deceptions. He-unknowing to the last-had taken her low spirits as a cue for a second honeymoon. This phenomenal hypocrisy had finally overridden any lingering thoughts of tolerance or forgiveness she might have entertained, and when, three decades ago tonight, they had checked into the Cottonwood Motel, she had come prepared for more than a night of love. She had let Buck shower, and when he emerged, she had leveled the Smith and Wesson.38 at him and blown a gaping hole in his chest. Then she'd run, throwing the gun away as she went, knowing the police were bound to catch her, and not much caring when they. They'd taken her to Carson County Jail in Panhandle, and,

after a few weeks, to trial. She never once tried to deny the murder. There'd been enough deception in her thirty-eight years of life as it was. And so when they found her defiant, they took her to Huntsville State Prison, chose a bright day the following October, and summarily passed 2,250 volts through her body, stopping her unrepentant heart almost instantaneously. An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth. She had been brought up with such simple moral equations. She'd not been unhappy to die by the same mathematics.

But tonight she and Buck had elected to retrace the journey they'd taken thirty years before, to see if they could discover how and why their marriage had ended in murder. It was a chance offered to many dead lovers, though few, apparently, took it up. Perhaps the thought of experiencing again the cataclysm that had ended their lives was too distasteful. Sadie, however, couldn't help but wonder if it had all been predestined, if a tender word from Buck, or a look of genuine affection in his murky eyes, could have stayed her trigger finger and so saved both their lives. This one-night stand would give them an opportunity to test history. Invisible, inaudible, they would follow the same route as they had three decades ago. The next few hours would tell if that route had led inevitably to murder. Room Seven was occupied, and so was the room beside it. The interconnecting door was wide, and fluorescent lights burned in both. The occupancy was not a problem. Sadie had long become used to the ethereal state; to wandering unseen among the living. In such a condition she had attended her niece's wedding, and later on her father's funeral, standing beside the grave with the dead old man and gossiping about the mourners. Buck however-never an agile individual-was more prone to carelessness. She hoped he would be careful tonight. After all, he wanted to see the experiment through as much as she did.

As they stood on the threshold and cast their eyes around the room in which their fatal farce had been played out, she wondered if the shot had hurt him very much. She must ask him tonight, she thought, should the opportunity arise.

There had been a young woman with a plain but pleasant face in the manager's office when Earl had gone in to book the rooms. She had now disappeared to be replaced by a man of sixty or so, wearing half a week's growth of mottled beard and a sweat-stained shirt. He looked up from a nose-close perusal of yesterday's Pampa Daily News when Earl entered.

"Yeah?"

"Is it possible to get some ice water?" Earl inquired. The man threw a hoarse yell over his shoulder. "Laura May? You in there?"

Through the doorway behind came the din of the late-night movie-shots, screams, the roar of an escaped beast-and then Laura May's response.

"What do you want, Pa?"

"There's a man wants room service," Laura May's father yelled back, not without a trace of irony in his voice. "W ill you get out here and serve him?"

No reply came; just more screams. They set Earl's teeth on edge. The manager glanced up at him. One of his eyes was clouded by a cataract.

"You with the evangelist?" he said.

"Yes… how did you know it was-?"

"Laura May recognized him. Seen his picture in the paper.

"That so?"

"Don't miss a trick, my baby."

As if on cue Laura May emerged from the room behind the office. When her brown eyes fell on Earl she visibly brightened.

"Oh…" she said, a smile quickening her features, “what can I do for you, mister?" The line, coupled with her smile, seemed to signal more than polite interest in Earl; or was that just his wishful thinking? Except for a lady of the night he'd met in Pomca City, Oklahoma, his sex life had been nonexistent in the last three months. Taking a chance, he returned Laura May's smile. Though she was at least thirty-five, her manner was curiously girlish; the look she was giving him almost intimidating direct. Meeting her eyes, Earl began to think that his first estimation had not been far off.

"Ice water," he said. "I wondered if you had any? Mrs. Gyer isn't feeling so well."

Laura May nodded. "I'll get some," she said, dallying for a moment in the door before returning into the television room. The din of the movie had abated-a scene of calm, perhaps, before the beast emerged

again-and in the hush Earl could hear the rain beating down outside, turning the earth to mud.

"Quite a gully washer tonight, eh?" the manager observed. "This keeps up, you'll be rained out tomorrow." "People come out in all kinds of weather," Earl said. "John Gyer's a big draw."

The man pulled a face. "Wouldn't rule out a tornado," he said, clearly reveling in the role of doomsayer. "We're just about due for one."

"Really?"

"Year before last, wind took the roof off the school. Just lifted it right off."

Laura May reappeared in the doorway with a tray on which a jug and four glasses were placed. Ice clinked against the jug's sides.

"What's that you say, Pa?" she asked.

"Tornado."

"Isn't hot enough," she announced with casual authority. Her father grunted his disagreement but made no argument in return. Laura May crossed toward Earl with the tray, but when he made a move to take it from her she said, "I'll take it myself. You lead on." He didn't object. It would give them a little while to exchange pleasantries as they walked to the Gyers' room; perhaps the same thought was in her mind. Either that, or she wanted a closer view of the evangelist.

They went together as far as the end of the office block walkway in silence. There they halted. Before them lay twenty yards of puddle-strewn earth between one building and the next.

"Shall I carry the jug?" Earl volunteered. "You bring the glasses and the tray."

"Sure," she replied. Then, with the same direct look she'd given him before, she said, "What's your name?" "Earl," he told her. "Earl Rayburn."

"I'm Laura May Cade."

"I'm most pleased to meet you, Laura May."

"You know about this place, do you?" she said. "Papa told you, I

suppose."

"You mean the tornadoes?" he asked. "No," she replied, "I mean murder."

Sadie stood at the bottom of the bed and looked at the woman lying on it. She has very little dress-sense, Sadie thought; the clothes were drab, and her hair wasn't fixed in a flattering way. She murmured something in her semi comatose state, and then-abruptly-she woke. Her eyes opened wide. There was some unshaped alarm in them; and pain too. Sadie looked at her and sighed.

"What's the problem?" Buck wanted to know. He'd put down the cases and was sitting in a chair opposite the fourth occupant of the room, a large man with lean, forceful features and a mane of steel-gray hair that would not have shamed an Old Testament prophet.

"No problem," Sadie replied.

"I don't want to share a room with these two," Buck said.

"Well this is the room where… where we stayed," Sadie replied.

"Let's move next door," Buck suggested, nodding through the open door into Room Eight. "We'll have more privacy."

"They can't see us," Sadie said.

"But I can see them," Buck replied, “and it gives me the creeps. It's not going to matter if we're in a different room, for Christ's sake." Without waiting for agreement from Sadie, Buck picked up the cases and carried them through into Earl's room. "Are you coming or not?" he asked Sadie. She nodded. It was better to give way to him. If she started to argue now they'd never get past the first hurdle. Conciliation was to be the keynote of this reunion, she reminded herself, and dutifully followed him into Room Eight.

On the bed, Virginia thought about getting up and going into the bathroom where, out of sight, she could take one or two tranquilizers. But John's presence frightened her. Sometimes she felt he could see right into her, that all her private guilt was an open book to him. She was certain that if she got up now and rooted in her bag for the medication, he would ask her what she was doing. If he did that, she'd blurt the truth out for sure. She didn't have the strength to resist the heat of his accusing eyes. No, it would be better to lie here and wait for Earl to come back with the water. Then, when the two men were

discussing the tour, she would slip away to take the forbidden pills. There was an evasive quality to the light in the room. It distressed her, and she wanted to close her lids against its tricks. Only moments before, the light had conjured a mirage at the end of the bed; a moth-wing flicker of substance that had almost congealed in the air before flitting away.

Over by the window, John was again reading under his breath. At first, she caught only a few of the words. "And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth…" She instantly recognized the passage; its imagery was unmistakable.

"…and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power."

The verse was from The Revelations of St. John the Divine. She knew the words that followed by heart. He had declaimed them time after time at meetings.

"And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads."

Gyer loved Revelations. He read it more often than the Gospels, whose stories he knew by heart but whose words did not ignite him the way the incantatory rhythms of Revelations did. When he preached Revelations, he shared the apocalyptic vision and felt exulted by it. His voice would take on a different note. The poetry, instead of coming out of him, came through him. Helpless in its grip, he rose on a spiral of ever more awesome metaphor: from angels to dragons and thence to Babylon, the Mother of Harlots, sitting upon a scarlet-colored beast.

Virginia tried to shut the words out. Usually, to hear her husband speak the poems of Revelations was a joy to her, but not tonight. Tonight the words seemed ripe to the point of corruption, and she sensed-perhaps for the first time that he didn't really understand what he was saying; that the spirit of the words passed him by while he recited them. She made a small, unintentional noise of complaint. Gyer stopped reading.

"What is it?" he said.

She opened her eyes, embarrassed to have interrupted him.

"Nothing," she said.

"Does my reading disturb you?" he wanted to know. The inquiry was a challenge, and she backed down from it. "No," she said. "No, of course not."

In the doorway between the two rooms, Sadie watched Virginia's face. The woman was lying of course, the words did disturb her. They disturbed Sadie too, but only because they seemed so pitifully melodramatic: a drug-dream of Armageddon, more comical than intimidating.

"Tell him," she advised Virginia. "Go on. Tell him you don't like it."

"Who are you talking to?" Buck said. "They can't hear you.

Sadie ignored her husband's remarks. "Go on," she said to Virginia. "Tell the bastard."

But Virginia lust lay there while Gyer took up the passage again, its absurdities escalating.

"And the shapes of the locusts were unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men."

"And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions."

Sadie shook her head: comic-book terrors, fit to scare children with. Why did people have to die to grow out of that kind of nonsense?

"Tell him," she said again. "Tell him how ridiculous he sounds."

Even as the words left her lips, Virginia sat up on the bed and said: "John?"

Sadie stared at her, willing her on. "Say it. Say it."

"Do you have to talk about death all the time. It's very depressing."

Sadie almost applauded. It wasn't quite the way she would have put it, but each to their own.

"What did you say?" Gyer asked her, assuming he'd heard incorrectly. Surely she wasn't challenging him? Virginia put a trembling hand up to her lips, as if to cancel the words before they came again, but they came nevertheless.

"Those passages you read. I hate them. They're so…"

"Stupid," Sadie prompted, unpleasant," Virginia said.

"Are you coming to bed or not?" Buck wanted to know.

"In a moment," Sadie replied over her shoulder. "I just want to see what happens in here."

"Life isn't a soap opera," Buck chimed in. Sadie was about to beg to differ, but before she had a chance the evangelist had approached Virginia's bed, Bible in hand.

"This is the inspired word of the Lord, Virginia," he said.

"I know John. But there are other passages "I thought you liked the Apocalypse."

"No," she said, “it distresses me."

"You're tired," he replied.

"Oh yes," Sadie interjected, “that's what they always tell you when you get too close to the truth. "You're tired," they say, “why don't you take a little nap?"'

"Why don't you sleep for a while?" Gyer said. "I'll go next door and work."

Virginia met her husband's condescending look for fully five seconds, then nodded.

"Yes," she conceded, "I am tired."

"Foolish woman," Sadie told her. "Fight back, or he'll do the same again. Give them an inch and they take half the damn state."

Buck appeared behind Sadie. "I've asked you once," he said, taking her arm, “we're here to make friends. So let's get to it. He pulled her away from the door, rather more roughly than was necessary. She shrugged off his hand. "There's no need for violence, Buck," she said.

"Ha! That's rich, coming from you," Buck said with a humorless laugh. "You want to see violence?" Sadie turned away from Virginia to look at her husband. "This is violence," he said. He had taken off his jacket; now he pulled his unbuttoned shirt open to reveal the shot wound. At such close quarters Sadie's.38 had made a sizeable hole in

Buck's chest, scorched and bloody. It was as fresh as the moment he died. He put his finger to it as if indicating the Sacred Heart. "You see that, sweetheart mine? You made that."

She peered at the hole with no little interest. It certainly was a permanent mark; about the only one she'd ever made on the man, she suspected.

"You cheated from the beginning, didn't you?" she said.

"We're not talking about cheating, we're talking about shooting," Buck returned.

"Seems to me one subject leads to the other," Sadie replied. "And back again."

Buck narrowed his already narrow eyes at her. Dozens of women had found that look irresistible, to judge by the numbers of anonymous mourners at his funeral. "All right," he said, "I had women. So what?" "So I shot you for it," Sadie replied flatly. That was about all she had to say on the subject. It had made for a short trial.

"Well at least tell me you're sorry," Buck burst out.

Sadie considered the proposition for a few moments and said: "But I'm not!" She realized the response lacked tact, but it was the unavoidable truth. Even as they'd strapped her into the electric chair, with the priest doing his best to console her lawyer, she hadn't regretted the way things had turned out.

"This whole thing is useless," Buck said. "We came here to make peace and you can't even say you're sorry. You're a sick woman, you know that? You always were. You pried into my business, you snooped around behind my back-" "I did not snoop," Sadie replied firmly "Your dirt came and found me."

"Dirt?"

"Oh yes, Buck, dirt. It always was with you. Furtive and sweaty."

He grabbed hold of her. "Take that back!" he demanded.

"You used to frighten me once," she replied coolly. "But then I bought a gun."

He thrust her away from him. "All right," he said, "don't say I didn't

try. I wanted to see if we could forgive and forget, I really did. But you're not willing to give an inch, are you?" He fingered his wound as he spoke, his voice softening. "We could have had a good time here tonight, babe," he murmured. "Just you and me. I could have given you a bit of the old jazz, you know what I mean? Time was, you wouldn't have said no.

She sighed softly. What he said was true. Time was she would have taken what little he gave her and counted herself a blessed woman. But times had changed.

"Come on, babe. Loosen up," he said smokily, and began to unbutton his shirt completely, pulling it out of his trousers. His belly was bald as a baby's. "What say we forget what you said and lie down and talk?" She was about to reply to his suggestion when the door of Room Seven opened and in came the man with the soulful eyes accompanied by a woman whose face rang a bell in Sadie's memory.

"Ice water," Earl said. Sadie watched him move across the room. There'd not been a man as fine as that in Wichita Falls; not that she could remember anyway. He almost made her want to live again.

"Are you going to get undressed?" Buck asked from the room behind her.

"In a minute, Buck. We've got all night, for Christ's sake."

"I'm Laura May Cade," the woman with the familiar face said as she set the ice water down on the table. Of course, thought Sadie, you're little Laura May. The girl had been five or six when Sadie was last here; an odd, secretive child, full of sly looks. The intervening years had matured her physically, but the strangeness was still in evidence in her slightly off-center features. Sadie turned to Buck, who was sitting on the bed untying his shoes. "Remember the little girl?" she said. "The one who you gave a quarter to, just to make her go away?" "What about her?"

"She's here."

"That so?" he replied, clearly uninterested.

Laura May had poured the water and was now taking the glass across to Virginia.

"It's real nice having you folks here," she said. "We don't get much happening here. Just the occasional tornado…" Gyer nodded to Earl,

who produced a five-dollar bill and gave it to Laura May. She thanked him, saying it wasn't necessary, then took the bill. She wasn't to be bribed into leaving, however.

"This kind of weather makes people feel real peculiar," she went on.

Earl could predict what subject was hovering behind Laura May's lips. He'd already heard the bones of the story on the way across, and knew Virginia was in no mood to hear such a tale.

"Thank you for the water-" he said, putting a hand on Laura May's arm to usher her through the door. But Gyer cut in.

"My wife's been suffering from heat exhaustion," he said. "You should be careful, ma'am," Laura May advised Virginia, "people do some mighty weird things-"

"Like what?" Virginia asked.

"1 don't think we-" Earl began, but before he could say 'want to hear," Laura May casually replied: "Oh, murder mostly."

Virginia looked up from the glass of ice water in which her focus had been immersed.

"Murder?" she said.

"Hear that?" said Sadie, proudly. "She remembers."

"In this very room," Laura May managed to blurt before Earl forcibly escorted her out.

"Wait," Virginia said as the two figures disappeared through the door. "Earl! I want to hear what happened." "No you don't," Gyer told her.

"O h yes she does," said Sadie very quietly, studying the look on Virginia's face. "You'd really like to know, wouldn't you, Ginnie?"

For a moment pregnant with possibilities, Virginia looked away from the outside door and stared straight through into Room Eight, her eyes seeming to rest on Sadie. The look was so direct it could almost have been one of recognition. The ice in her glass tinkled. She frowned.

"What's wrong?" Gyer asked her.

Virginia shook her head.

"I asked you what was wrong," Gyer insisted.

Virginia put down her glass on the bedside table. After a moment she said very simply: "There's somebody here, John."

"What do you mean?"

"There's somebody in the room with us. I heard voices before. Raised voices."

"Next door," Gyer said.

"No, from Earl's room.

"It's empty. It must have been next door."

Virginia was not to be silenced with logic. "I heard voices, I tell you. And I saw something at the end of the bed. Something in the air."

"Oh my Jesus," said Sadie, under her breath. "The goddamn woman's psychic."

Buck stood up. He was naked now but for his shorts. He wandered over to the interconnecting door to look at Virginia with new appreciation.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Hush," Sadie told him, moving out of Virginia's line of vision. She said she could see us.

"You're not well, Virginia," Gyer was saying in the next room. "It's those pills he fed you…

"No," Virginia replied, her voice rising. "When will you stop talking about the pills? They were just to calm me down, help me sleep."

She certainly wasn't calm now, thought Buck. He liked the way she trembled as she tried to hold back her tears. She looked in need of some of the old jazz, did poor Virginia. Now that would help her sleep.

"I tell you I can see things," she was telling her husband.

"That I can't?" Gyer replied incredulously. "Is that what you're

saying? That you can see visions the rest of us are blind to?"

"I'm not proud of it, damn you," she yelled at him, incensed by this inversion.

"Come away, Buck," Sadie said. "We're upsetting her. She knows we're here."

"So what?" Buck responded. "Her prick of a husband doesn't believe her. Look at him. He thinks she's crazy." "Well we'll make her crazy if we parade around," said Sadie. "At least let's keep our voices down, huh?" Buck looked around at Sadie and offered up a dirty rag of a smile. "W ant to make it worth my while?" he said sleazily. "I'll keep out of the way if you and me can have some fun."

Sadie hesitated a moment before replying. It was probably perverse to reject Buck's advances. The man was an emotional infant and always had been. Sex was one of the few ways he could express himself. "All right, Buck," she said, “just let me freshen up and fix my hair."

An uneasy truce had apparently been declared in Room Seven.

"I'm going to take a shower, Virginia," Gyer said. "I suggest you lie down and stop making a fool of yourself. You go talking like that in front of people and you'll jeopardize the crusade, you hear me?"

Virginia looked at her husband with clearer sight than she'd ever enjoyed before. "Oh yes," she said, without a trace of feeling in her voice, "I hear you."

He seemed satisfied. He slipped off his jacket and went into the bathroom, taking his Bible with him. She heard the door lock, and then exhaled a long, queasy sigh. There would be recriminations aplenty for the exchange they'd just had. He would squeeze every last drop of contrition from her in the days to come. She glanced around at the interconnecting door. There was no longer any sign of those shadows in the air; not the least whisper of lost voices. Perhaps, just perhaps, she had imagined it. She opened her bag and rummaged for the bottles of pills hidden there. One eye on the bathroom door, she selected a cocktail of three varieties and downed them with a gulp of ice water. In fact, the ice in the jug had long since melted. The water she drank down was tepid, like the rain that fell relentlessly outside. By morning, perhaps the whole world would have been washed away. If it had, she mused, she wouldn't grieve.

"I asked you not to mention the killing," Earl told Laura May. "Mrs. Gyer can't take that kind of talk." "People are getting killed all the time," Laura May replied, unfazed. "Can't go around with her head in a bucket." Earl said nothing. They had just gotten to the end of the walkway. The return sprint across the lot to the other building was ahead. Laura May turned to face him. She was several inches' the shorter of the two. Her eyes, turned up to his, were large and luminous. Angry as he was, he couldn't help but notice how full her mouth was, how her lips glistened.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean to get you into trouble."

"Sure I know. I'm just edgy."

"It's the heat," she returned. "Like I said, puts thoughts into people's heads. You know." Her look wavered for a moment; a hint of uncertainty crossed her face. Earl could feel the back of his neck tingle. This was his cue, wasn't it? She'd offered it unequivocally. But the words failed him. Finally, it was she who said: "Do you have to go back there right now?"

He swallowed; his throat was dry. "Don't see why," he said. "I mean, I don't want to get between them when they're having words with each other."

"Bad blood?" she asked.

"I think so. I'm best leaving them to sort it out in peace. They don't want me."

Laura May looked down from Earl's face. "Well I do," she breathed, the words scarcely audible above the thump of the rain.

He put a cautious hand to her face and touched the down of her cheek. She trembled, ever so slightly. Then he bent his head to kiss her. She let him brush her lips with his.

"Why don't we go to my room?" she said against his mouth. "I don't like it out here."

"What about your Papa?"

"He'll be dead drunk, by now. It's the same routine every night. Just take it quietly. He'll never know." Earl wasn't very happy with this game plan. It was more than his job was worth to be found in bed with Laura May. He was a married man, even if he hadn't seen

Barbara in three months. Laura May sensed his trepidation. "Don't come if you don't want to," she said.

"It's not that," he replied.

As he looked down at her she licked her lips. It was a completely unconscious motion, he felt sure, but it was enough to decide him. In a sense, though he couldn't know it at the time, all that lay ahead-the farce, the bloodletting, the inevitable tragedy-pivoted on Laura May wetting her lower lip with such casual sensuality. "Ah shit," he said, “you're too much, you know that?"

He bent to her and kissed her again, while somewhere over toward Skellytown the clouds gave out a loud roll of thunder, like a circus drummer before some particularly elaborate acrobatics.

In Room Seven Virginia was having bad dreams. The pills had not secured her a safe harbor in sleep. Instead she'd been pitched into a howling tempest. In her dreams she was clinging to a crippled tree-a pitiful anchor in such a maelstrom-while the wind threw cattle and automobiles into the air, sucking half the world up into the pitch black clouds that boiled above her head. Just as she thought she must die here, utterly alone, she saw two figures a few yards from her, appearing and disappearing in the blinding veils of dust the wind was stirring up. She couldn't see their faces, so she called to them.

"Who are you?"

Next door, Sadie heard Virginia talking in her sleep. What was the woman dreaming about? she wondered. She fought the temptation to go next door and whisper in the dreamer's ear, however.

Behind Virginia's eyelids the dream raged on. Though she called to the strangers in the storm they seemed not to hear her. Rather than be left alone, she forsook the comfort of the tree-which was instantly uprooted and whirled away-and battled through the biting dust to where the strangers stood. As she approached, a sudden lull in the wind revealed them to her. One was male, the other female; both were armed. As she called to them to make herself known they attacked each other, opening fatal wounds in neck and torso.

"Murder!" she shouted as the wind spattered her face with the antagonists' blood. "For God's sake, somebody stop them! Murder!"

And suddenly she was awake, her heart beating fit to burst. The dream still flitted behind her eyes. She shook her head to rid herself of

the horrid images, then moved groggily to the edge of the bed and stood up. Her head felt so light it might float off like a balloon. She needed some fresh air. Seldom in her life had she felt so strange. It was as though she was losing her slender grip 6n what was real; as though the solid world were slipping through her fingers. She crossed to the outside door. In the bathroom she could hear John speaking aloud-addressing the mirror, no doubt, to refine every detail of his delivery. She stepped out onto the walkway. There was some refreshment to be had out here, but precious little. In one of the rooms at the end of the block a child was crying. As she listened a sharp voice silenced it. For maybe ten seconds the voice was hushed. Then it began again in a higher key. Go on, she told the child, you cry; there's plenty of reason. She trusted unhappiness in people. More and more it was all she trusted. Sadness was so much more honest than the artificial bonhomie that was all the style these days: that facade of empty-headed optimism that was plastered over the despair that everyone felt in their heart of hearts. The child was expressing that wise panic now, as it cried in the night. She silently applauded its honesty.

In the bathroom, John Gyer tired of the sight of his own face in the mirror and gave some time over to thought. He put down the toilet lid and sat in silence for several minutes. He could smell his own stale sweat. He needed a shower, and then a good night's sleep. Tomorrow: Pampa. Meetings, speeches; thousands of hands to be shaken and blessings to be bestowed. Sometimes he felt so tired, and then he'd get to wondering if the Lord couldn't lighten his burden a little. But that was the Devil talking in his ear, wasn't it? He knew better than to pay that scurrilous voice much attention. If you listened once, the doubts would get a hold, the way they had of Virginia. Somewhere along the road, while his back had been turned about the Lord's business, she'd lost her way, and the Old One had found her wandering. He, John Gyer, would have to bring her back to the path of the righteous; make her see the danger her soul was in. There would be tears and complaints; maybe she would be bruised a little. But bruises healed. He put down his Bible and went down on his knees in the narrow space between the bath and the towel rack and began to pray. He tried to find some benign words, a gentle prayer to ask for the strength to finish his task, and to bring Virginia back to her senses. But mildness had deserted him. It was the vocabulary of Revelations that came back to his lips, unbidden. He Jet the words spill out, even though the fever in him burned brighter with every syllable he spoke.

"What do you think?" Laura May had asked Earl as she escorted him into her bedroom. Earl was too startled by what was in front of him to

offer any coherent reply. The bedroom was a mausoleum, founded, it seemed, in the name of Trivia. Laid out on the shelves, hung on the walls and covering much of the floor were items that might have been picked out of any garbage can: empty Coke cans, collections of ticket stubs, coverless and defaced magazines, vandalized toys, shattered mirrors, postcards never sent, letters never read-a limping parade of the forgotten and the forsaken. His eye passed back arid forth over the elaborate display and found not one item of worth among the junk and bric-a-brac. Yet all this inconsequential had been arranged with meticulous care so that no one piece masked another. And-now that he looked more closely-he saw that every item was numbered, as if each had its place in some system of junk. The thought that this was all Laura May's doing shrank Earl's stomach. The woman was clearly verging on lunacy.

"This is my collection," she told him.

"So I see," he replied.

"I've been collecting since I was six." She crossed the room to the dressing table, where most women Earl had known would have arranged their toiletries. But here were arrayed more of the same inane exhibits. "Everybody leaves something behind, you know," Laura May said to Earl, picking up some piece of dreck with all the care others might bestow on a precious stone and examining it before placing it back in its elected position. "Is that so?" Earl said.

"Oh yeah. Everyone. Even if it's only a dead match or a tissue with lipstick on it. We used to have a Mexican girl, Ophelia, who cleaned the rooms when I was a child. It started as a game with her, really. She'd always bring me something belonging to the guests who'd left. When she died I took over collecting stuff for myself, always keeping something. As a memento."

Earl began to grasp the absurd poetry of the museum. In Laura May's neat body was all the ambition of a great curator. Not for her mere art. She was collecting keepsakes of a more intimate nature, forgotten signs of people who'd passed this way, and who, most likely, she would never see again.

"You've got it all marked," he observed.

"Oh yes," she replied, “it wouldn't be much use if I didn't know who it all belonged to, would it?" Earl supposed not. "Incredible," he murmured quite genuinely. She smiled at him. He suspected she didn't

show her collection to many people. He felt oddly honored to be viewing it.

"I've got some really prize things," she said, opening the middle drawer of the dressing table, “stuff I don't put on display."

"Oh?" he said.

The drawer she'd opened was lined with tissue paper, which rustled as she brought forth a selection of special acquisitions. A soiled tissue found beneath the bed of a Hollywood star who had tragically died six weeks after staying at the motel. A heroin needle carelessly left by X; an empty book of matches, which she had traced to a homosexual bar in Amarillo, discarded by Y The names she mentioned meant little or nothing to Earl, but he played the game as he felt she wanted it played, mingling exclamations of disbelief with gentle laughter. Her pleasure, fed by his, grew. She took him through all the exhibits in the dressing-table drawer, offering some anecdote or biographical insight with every one.

When she had finished, she said: "I wasn't quite telling you the truth before, when I said it began as a game with Ophelia. That really came later."

"So what started you off?" he asked.

She went down on her haunches and unlocked the bottom drawer of the dressing table with a key on a chain around her neck. There was only one artifact in this drawer. This she lifted out almost reverentially and stood up to show him.

"What's this?"

"You asked me what started the collection," she said. "This is it. I found it, and I never gave it back. You can look if you want."

She extended the prize toward him, and he unfolded the pressed white cloth the object had been wrapped up in. It was a gun. A Smith and Wesson.38, in pristine condition. It took him only a moment to realize which motel guest this piece of history had once belonged to.

"The gun that Sadie Durning used…" he said, picking it up. "Am I right?"

She beamed. "I found it in the scrub behind the motel, before the police got to searching for it. There was such a commotion, you know,

nobody looked twice at me. And of course they didn't try and look for it in the light." "Why was that?"

"The '55 tornado hit, just the day after. Took the motel roof right off; blew the school away. People were killed that year. We had funerals for weeks."

"They didn't question you at all?"

"I was a good liar," she replied, with no small satisfaction.

"And you never owned up to having it? All these years?"

She looked faintly contemptuous of the suggestion. "They might have taken it off me," she said. "But it's evidence."

"They executed her anyway, didn't they?" she replied. "Sadie admitted to it all, right from the beginning. It wouldn't have made any difference if they'd found the murder weapon or not."

Earl turned the gun over in his hand. There was encrusted dirt on it.

"That's blood," Laura May informed him. "It was still wet when I found it. She must have touched Buck's body to make sure he was dead. Only used two bullets. The rest are still in there."

Earl had never much liked weapons since his brother-in-law had blown off three of his toes in an accident. The thought that the.38 was still loaded made him yet more apprehensive. He put it back in its wrapping and folded the cloth over it.

"I've never seen anything like this place," he said as Laura May kneeled to return the gun to the drawer. "You're quite a woman, you know that?"

She looked up at him. Her hand slowly slid up the front of his trousers.

"I'm glad you like what you see," she said.

"Sadie…? Are you coming to bed or not?"

"I just want to finish fixing my hair."

"You're not playing fair. Forget your hair and come over here."

"In a minute."

"Shit!"

"You're in no hurry, are you, Buck? I mean, you're not going anywhere?"

She caught his reflection in the mirror. He gave her a sour glance.

"You think it's funny, don't you?" he said.

"Think what's funny?"

"What happened. M e getting shot. You getting the chair. It gives you some perverse satisfaction." She thought about this for a few moments. It was the first time Buck had shown any real desire to talk seriously. She wanted to answer with the truth.

"Yes," she said, when she was certain that was the answer. "Yes, I suppose it did please me, in an odd sort of way." '1 knew it," said Buck.

"Keep your voice down," Sadie snapped, “she'll hear us."

"She's gone outside. I heard her. And don't change the subject." He rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed. The wound did look painful, Sadie thought.

"Did it hurt much?" she asked, turning to him.

"Are you kidding?" he said, displaying the hole for her. "What does it fucking look like?"

"I thought it would be quick. I never wanted you to suffer."

"Is that right?" Buck said.

"Of course. I loved you once, Buck. I really did. You know what the headline was the day after?" "No," Buck replied, "I was otherwise engaged, remember?"

"'MOTEL BECOMES SLAUGHTERHOUSE OF LOVE," it said. There were pictures of the room, of the blood on the floor, and you being carried out under a sheet."

"My finest hour," he said bitterly. "And I don't even get my face in the press."

"I'll never forget the phrase 'Slaughterhouse of Love!' I thought it

was romantic. Don't you?" Buck grunted in disgust. Sadie went on anyway. "I got three hundred proposals of marriage while I was waiting for the chair, did I ever tell you that?"

"Oh yeah?" Buck said. "Did they come and visit you? Give you a bit of the old jazz to keep your mind off the big day?"

"No," said Sadie frostily.

"You could have had a time of it. I would have."

"I'm sure you would," she replied.

"Just thinking about it's getting me cooking, Sadie. Why don't you come and get it while it's hot?" "We came here to talk, Buck."

"We talked, for Christ's sake," he said. "I don't want to talk no more. Now come here. You promised." He rubbed his abdomen and gave her a crooked smile. "Sorry about the blood and all, but I ain't responsible for that." Sadie stood up.

"Now you're being sensible," he said.

As Sadie Durning crossed to the bed, Virginia came in out of the rain. It had cooled her face somewhat, and the tranquilizers she'd taken were finally beginning to soothe her system. In the bathroom, John was still praying, his voice rising and falling. She crossed to the table and glanced at his notes, but the tightly packed words wouldn't come into focus. She picked up the papers to peer more closely at them. As she did so she heard a groan from the next room. She froze. The groan came again, louder. The papers trembled in her hands. She made to put them back on the table but the voice came a third time, and this time the papers slipped from her hand.

"Give a little, damn you…" the voice said. The words, though blurred, were unmistakable; more grunts followed. Virginia moved toward the door between the rooms, the trembling spreading up from her hands to the rest of her body. "Play the game, will you?" the voice came again; there was anger in it. Cautiously, Virginia looked through into Room Eight, holding onto the door lintel for support. There was a shadow on the bed. It writhed distressingly, as if attempting to devour itself. She stood, rooted to the spot, trying to stifle a cry while more sounds rose from the shadow Not one voice this time, but two. The words were jumbled. In her growing panic she could make little sense of them. She couldn't turn her back on the scene, however. She stared on, trying to make some sense of the shifting configuration. Now a

smattering of words came clear, and with them, a recognition of the event on the bed. She heard a woman's voice protesting. Now she even began to see the speaker, struggling beneath a partner who was attempting to arrest her flailing arms. Her first instinct about the scene had been correct: it was a devouring, of a kind.

Sadie looked up into Buck's face. That bastard grin of his had returned; it made her trigger finger itch. This is what he'd come for tonight. Not for conversation about failed dreams, but to humiliate her the way he had so often in the past, whispering obscenities into her neck while he pinned her to the sheets. The pleasure he took in her discomfort made her seethe.

"Let go of me!" she shouted, louder than she'd intended.

At the door, Virginia said: "Let her alone."

"We've got an audience," Buck Durning grinned, pleased by the appalled look on Virginia's face. Sadie took advantage of his diverted attention. She slipped her arm from his grasp and pushed him off her. He rolled off the narrow bed with a yell. As she stood up, she looked around at the ashen woman in the doorway. How much could Virginia see or hear? Enough to know who they were?

Buck was climbing over the bed toward his sometime murderer. "Come on," he said. "It's only the crazy lady." "Keep away from me," Sadie warned.

"You can't harm me now, woman. I'm already dead, remember." His exertions had opened the gunshot wound. There was blood smeared all over him; over her too, now she saw. She backed toward the door. There was nothing to be salvaged here. What little chance of reconciliation there had been had degenerated into a bloody farce. The only solution to the whole sorry mess was to get out and leave poor Virginia to make what sense of it she could. The longer she stayed to fight with Buck, the worse the situation would become for all three of them. "Where are you going?" Buck demanded.

"Out," she responded. "Away from you. I said I loved you, Buck, didn't I? Well… maybe I did. But I'm cured now. "Bitch!"

"Goodbye Buck. Have a nice eternity."

"Worthless bitch!"

She didn't reply to his insults. She simply walked through the door

and out into the night.

Virginia watched the shadow pass through the closed door and held on to the tattered remains of her sanity with white-knuckled fists. She had to put these apparitions out of her head as quickly as possible or she knew she'd go crazy. She turned her back on Room Eight. What she needed now was pills. She picked up her handbag, only to drop it again as her shaking fingers rooted for the bottles, depositing the contents of the bag onto the floor. One of the bottles, which she had failed to seal properly, spilled. A rainbow assortment of tablets rolled across the stained carpet in every direction. She bent to pick them up. Tears had started to come, blinding her. She felt for the pills as best she could, feeding half a handful into her mouth and trying to swallow them dry. The tattoo of the rain on the roof sounded louder and louder in her head; a roll of thunder gave weight to the percussion.

And then, John's voice.

"What are you doing, Virginia?"

She looked up, tears in her eyes, a pill-laden hand hovering at her lips. She'd forgotten her husband entirely. The shadows and the rain and the voices had driven all thought of him from her head. She let the pills drop back to the carpet. Her limbs were shaking. She didn't have the strength to stand up.

"I… I… heard the voices again," she said.

His eyes had come to rest on the spilled contents of bag and bottle. Her crime was spread for him to see quite plainly. It was useless to try and deny anything; it would only enrage him further.

"Woman," he said. "Haven't you learned your lesson?"

She didn't reply. Thunder drowned his next words. He repeated them, more loudly.

"Where did you get the pills, Virginia?"

She shook her head weakly.

"Earl again, I suppose. Who else?"

"No," she murmured.

"Don't lie to me, Virginia!" He had raised his voice to compete with the storm. "You know the Lord hears your lies, as I hear them. And you are judged, Virginia! Judged.'"

"Please leave me be," she pleaded.

"You're poisoning yourself."

"I need them, John," she told him. "I really do." She had no energy to hold his bullying at bay; nor did she want him to take the pills from her. But then what was the use of protesting? He would have his way, as always. It would be wiser to give up the booty now and save herself unnecessary anguish.

"Look at yourself," he said, “groveling on the floor."

"Don't start on me, John," she replied. "You win. Take the pills. Go on! Take them!"

He was clearly disappointed by her rapid capitulation, like an actor preparing for a favorite scene only to find the curtain rung down prematurely. But he made the most of her invitation, upending her handbag on the bed, and collecting the bottles.

"Is this all?" he demanded.

"Yes," she said.

"I won't be deceived, Virginia."

"That's all!" she shouted back at him. Then more softly: "I swear… that's all."

"Earl will be sorry. I promise you that. He's exploited your weakness-”

"… no!"

"-your weakness and your fear. The man is in Satan's employ, that much is apparent."

"Don't talk nonsense!" she said, surprising herself with her own vehemence. "I asked him to supply them." She got to her feet with some difficulty. "He didn't want to defy you, John. It was me all along."

Gyer shook his head. "No, Virginia. You won't save him. Not this

time. He's worked to subvert me all along. I see that now. Worked to harm my crusade through you. Well I'm wise to him now. Oh yes. Oh yes." He suddenly turned and pitched the handful of bottles through the open door and into the rainy darkness outside. Virginia watched them fly and felt her heart sink. There was precious little sanity to be had on a night like this-it was a night for going crazy wasn't it? With the rain bruising your skull and murder in the air-and now the damn fool had thrown away her last chance of equilibrium. He turned back to her, his prefect teeth bared.

"How many times do you have to be told?"

He was not to be denied his scene after all, it seemed.

"I'm not listening!" she told him, clamping her hands over her ears. Even so she could hear the rain. "I won't listen!" "I'm patient, Virginia," he said. "The Lord will have his judgment in the fullness of time. Now, where's Earl?" She shook her head. Thunder came again; she wasn't sure if it was inside or out.

"Where is he?" he boomed at her. "Gone for more of the same filth?"

"No!" she yelled back. "I don't know where he's gone."

"You pray, woman," Gyer said. "You get down on your knees and thank the Lord I'm here to keep you from Satan." Content that his words made a striking exit line, he headed out in search of Earl, leaving Virginia shaking but curiously elated. He would be back, of course. There would be more recriminations, and from her, the obligatory tears. As to Earl, he would have to defend himself as best he could. She slumped down on the bed, and her bleary eyes came to rest on the tablets that were still scattered across the floor. All was not quite lost. There were no more than two dozen, so she would have to be sparing in her use of them, but they were better than nothing at all. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hands, she kneeled down again to gather the pills up. As she did so she realized that someone had their eyes on her. Not the evangelist, back so soon? She looked up. The door out to the rain was still wide open, but he wasn't standing there. Her heart seemed to lose its rhythm for a moment as she remembered the shadows in the room next door. There had been two. One had departed; but the other…?

Her eyes slid across to the interconnecting door. It was there, a greasy smudge that had taken on a new solidity since last she'd set eyes on it. Was it that the apparition was gaining coherence, or that

she was seeing it in more detail? It was quite clearly human; and just as apparently male. It was staring at her, she had no doubt of that. She could even see its eyes, when she concentrated. Her tenuous grasp of its existence was improving. It was gaining fresh resolution with every trembling breath she took.

She stood up, very slowly. It took a step through the interconnecting door. She moved toward the outside door, and it matched her move with one of its own, sliding with eerie speed between her and the night. Her outstretched arm brushed against its smoky form and, as if illuminated by a lightning flash, an entire portrait of her accoster sprang into view in front of her, only to disappear as she withdrew her hand. She had glimpsed enough to appall her however. The vision was that of a dead man; his chest had been blown open. Was this more of her dream, spilling into the living world? She thought of calling after John, to summon him back, but that meant approaching the door again, and risking contact with the apparition. Instead she took a cautious step backward, reciting a prayer beneath her breath as she did so. Perhaps John had been correct all along. Perhaps she had invited this lunacy to herself with the very tablets she was even now treading to powder underfoot. The apparition closed in on her. Was it her imagination, or had it opened its arms, as if to embrace her?

Her heel caught on the skirt of the coverlet. Before she could stop herself she was toppling backward. Her arms flailed, seeking support. Again she made contact with the dream-thing; again the whole horrid picture appeared in front of her. But this time it didn't disappear, because the apparition had snatched at her hand and was grasping it tight. Her fingers felt as though they'd been plunged into ice water. She yelled for it to let her be, flinging up her free arm to push her assailant away, but it simply grasped her other hand too.

Unable to resist, she met its gaze. They were not the Devil's eyes that looked at her-they were slightly stupid, even comical, eyes-and below them a weak mouth which only reinforced her impression of witlessness. Suddenly she was not afraid. This was no demon. It was a delusion, brought on by exhaustion and pills; it could do her no harm. The only danger here was that she hurt herself in her attempts to keep the hallucinations at bay.

Buck sensed that Virginia was losing the will to resist. "That's better," he coaxed her. "You just want a bit of the old jazz, don't you, Ginnie?"

He wasn't certain if she heard him, but no matter. He could readily

make his intentions apparent. Dropping one of her hands, he ran his palm across her breasts. She sighed, a bewildered expression in her beautiful eyes, but she made no effort to resist his attentions.

"You don't exist," she told him plainly. "You're only in my mind, like John said. The pills made you. The pills did it all."

Buck let the woman babble; Let her think whatever she pleased, as long as it made her compliant. "That's right, isn't it?" she said. "You're not real, are you?"

He obliged her with a polite reply. "Certainly," he said, squeezing her "I'm just a dream, that's all." The answer seemed to satisfy her. "No need to fight me, is there?" he said. "I'll have come and gone before you know it."

The manager's office lay empty. From the room beyond it Gyer heard a television. It stood to reason that Earl must be somewhere in the vicinity. He bad left their room with the girl who'd brought the ice water, and they certainly wouldn't be taking a walk together in weather like this. The thunder had moved in closer in the last few minutes. Now it was almost overhead. Gyer enjoyed the noise and the spectacle of the lightning. It fueled his sense of occasion.

"Earl!" he yelled, making his way through the office and into the room with the television. The late movie was nearing its climax, the sound turned up deafeningly loud. A fantastical beast of some kind was treading Tokyo to rubble; citizens fled, screaming. Asleep in a chair in front of this papier-мвснй apocalypse was a late middle-aged man. Neither the thunder nor Gyer's calls had stirred him. A tumbler of spirits, nursed in his lap, had slipped from his hand and stained his trousers. The whole scene stank of bourbon and depravity. Gyer made a note of it for future use in the pulpit.

A chill blew in from the office. Gyer turned, expecting a visitor, but there was nobody in the office behind him. He stared into space. All the way across here he'd had a sense of being followed, yet there was nobody on his heels. He canceled his suspicions. Fears like this were for women and old men afraid of the dark. He stepped between the sleeping drunkard and the ruin of Tokyo toward the closed door beyond.

"Earl?" he called out, “answer me!"

Sadie watched Gyer open the door and step into the kitchen. His bombast amazed her. She'd expected his subspecies to be extinct by

now. Could such melodrama be credible in this sophisticated age? She'd never much liked church people, but this example was particularly offensive; there was more than a whiff of malice beneath the flatulence. He was riled and unpredictable, and he would not be pleased by the scene that awaited him in Laura May's room. Sadie had already been there. She had watched the lovers for a little while, until their passion became too much for her and had driven her out to cool herself by watching the rain. Now the evangelist's appearance drew her back the way she'd come, fearful that what-ever was now in the air, the night's events could not end well. In the kitchen, Gyer was shouting again. He clearly enjoyed the sound of his own voice.

"Earl! You bear me? I'm not to be cheated!"

In Laura May's room Earl was attempting to perform three acts at the same time. One, kiss the woman he had just made love with; two, pull on his damp trousers; and three, invent an adequate excuse to offer Gyer if the evangelist reached the bedroom door before some illusion of innocence had been created. As it was, he had no time to complete any of the tasks. His tongue was still locked in Laura May's tender mouth when the lock on the door was forced. "Found you!"

Earl broke his kiss and turned toward the messianic voice. Gyer was standing in the doorway, rain-plastered hair a gray skull cap, his face bright with fury. The light thrown up on him from the silk-draped lamp beside the bed made him look massive. The glint in his come-to-the-Lord eyes was verging on the manic. Earl had heard tell of the great man's righteous wrath from Virginia; furniture had been trashed in the past, and bones broken. "Is there no end to your iniquity?" he demanded to know, the words coming with unnerving calm from between his narrow lips. Earl hoisted his trousers up, fumbling for the zipper.

"This isn't your business…" he began, but Gyer's fury powdered the words on his tongue.

Laura May was not so easily cowed. "You get out," she said, pulling a sheet up to cover her generous breasts. Earl glanced around at her; at the smooth shoulders he'd all too recently kissed. He wanted to kiss them again now, but the man in black crossed the room in four quick strides and took hold of him by hair and arm. The movement, in the confined space of Laura May's room, had the effect of an earth tremor. Pieces of her precious collection toppled over on the shelves and dressing table, one exhibit falling against another, and that against its neighbor, until a minor avalanche of trivia hit the floor. Laura May

was blind to any damage however. Her thoughts were with the man who had so sweetly shared her bed. She could see the trepidation in Earl's eyes as the evangelist dragged him away, and she shared it.

"Let him be!" she shrieked, forsaking her modesty and getting up from the bed. "He hasn't done anything wrong!" The evangelist paused to respond, Earl wrestling uselessly to free himself. "What would you know about error, whore?" Gyer spat at her. "You're too steeped in sin. You with your nakedness, and your stinking bed." The bed did stink, but only of good soap and recent love. She had nothing to apologize for, and she wasn't going to let this two-bit Bible-thumper intimidate her.

"I'll call the cops!" she warned. "If you don't leave him alone, I'll call them!"

Gyer didn't grace the threat with a reply. He simply dragged Earl out through the door and into the kitchen. Laura May yelled: "Hold on, Earl. I'll get help." Her lover didn't answer. He was too busy preventing Gyer from pulling out his hair by the roots.

Sometimes, when the days were long and lonely, Laura May had daydreamed dark men like the evangelist. She had imagined them coming before tornadoes, wreathed in dust. She had pictured herself lifted up by them-only half against her will-and taken away. But the man who had lain in her bed tonight had been utterly unlike her fever dream lovers; he had been foolish and vulnerable. If he were to die at the hands of a man like Gyer-whose image she had conjured in her desperation-she would never forgive herself.

She heard her father say: "What's going on?" in the far room. Something fell and smashed; a plate perhaps, from off the dresser, or a glass from his lap. She prayed her Papa wouldn't try and tackle the evangelist. He would be chaff in the wind if he did. She went back to the bed to root for her clothes. They were wound up in the sheets, and her frustration mounted with every second she lost searching for them. She tossed the pillows aside. One landed on the dressing table; more of her exquisitely arranged pieces were swept to the floor. As she pulled on her underwear her father appeared at the door. His drink-flushed features turned a deeper red seeing her state.

"What you been doing, Laura May?"

"Never mind, Pa. There's no time to explain."

"But there's men out there-”

"I know. I know. I want you to call the sheriff in Panhandle. Understand?"

"What's going on?"

"Never mind. Just call Alvin and be quick about it or we're going to have another murder on our hands." The thought of slaughter galvanized Milton Cade. He disappeared, leaving his daughter to finish dressing. Laura May knew that on a night like this Alvin Baker and his deputy could be a long time coming. In the meanwhile God alone knew what the mad-dog preacher would be capable of.

From the doorway, Sadie watched the woman dress. Laura May was a plain creature, at least to Sadie's critical eye, and her fair skin made her look wan and insubstantial despite her full figure. But then, thought Sadie, who am I to complain of lack of substance? Look at me. And for the first time in the thirty years since her death she felt a nostalgia for corporality. In part because she envied Laura May her bliss with Earl, and in part because she itched to have a role in the drama that was rapidly unfolding around her.

In the kitchen an abruptly sobered Milton Cade was blabbering on the phone, trying to rouse some action from the people in Panhandle, while Laura May, who had finished dressing, unlocked the bottom drawer of her dressing table and rummaged for something. Sadie peered over the woman's shoulder to discover what the trophy was, and a thrill of recognition made her scalp tingle as her eyes alighted on her.38. So it was Laura May who had found the gun; the whey-faced six-year-old who had been running up and down the walkway all that evening thirty years ago, playing games with herself and singing songs in the hot still air.

It delighted Sadie to see the murder weapon again. Maybe, she thought, I have left some sign of myself to help shape the future. Maybe I am more than a headline on a yellowed newspaper, a dimming memory in aging heads. She watched with new and eager eyes as Laura May slipped on some shoes and headed out into the bellowing storm.

Virginia sat slumped against the wall of Room Seven and looked across at the seedy figure leaning on the door lintel across from her. She had let the delusion she had conjured have what way it would with her; and never in her forty-odd years had she heard such depravity promised. But though the shadow had come at her again and again, pressing its cold body onto hers, its icy, slack mouth

against her own, it had failed to carry one act of violation through. Three times it had tried. Three times the urgent words whispered in her ear had not been realized. Now it guarded the door, preparing, she guessed, for a further assault. Its face was clear enough for her to read the bafflement and the shame in its features. It viewed her, she thought, with murder on its mind.

Outside, she heard her husband's voice above the din of the thunder, and Earl's voice too, raised in protest. There was a fierce argument going on, that much was apparent. She slid up the wall, trying to make out the words. The delusion watched her balefully.

"You failed," she told it.

It didn't reply.

"You're just a dream of mine, and you failed."

It opened its mouth and waggled its pallid tongue. She didn't understand why it hadn't evaporated. But perhaps it would tag along with her until the pills had worked their way through her system. No matter. She had endured the worst it could offer. Now, given time, it would surely leave her be. Its failed rapes left it bereft of power over her. She crossed toward the door, no longer afraid. It raised itself from its slouched posture.

"Where are you going?" it demanded.

"Out," she said. "To help Earl."

"No," it told her, "I haven't finished with you."

"You're just a phantom," she retorted. "You can't stop me."

It offered up a grin that was three parts malice to one part charm. "You're wrong, Virginia," Buck said. There was no purpose in deceiving the woman any longer; he'd tired of that particular game. And perhaps he'd failed to get the old jazz going because she'd given herself to him so easily, believing he was some harmless nightmare. "I'm no delusion, woman," he said. "I'm Buck Durning." She frowned at the wavering figure. Was this a new trick her psyche was playing? "Thirty years ago I was shot dead in this very room. Just about where you're standing in fact." Instinctively, Virginia glanced down at the carpet at her feet, almost expecting the bloodstains to be there still. "We came back tonight, Sadie and I," the ghost went on. "A one-night stand at the Slaughterhouse of Love. That's what they called this

place, did you know that? People used to come here from all over, just to peer in at this very room; just to see where Sadie Durning had shot her husband Buck. Sick people, Virginia, don't you think? More interested in murder than love. Not me… I've always liked love, you know? Almost the only thing I've ever had much of a talent for, in fact."

"You lied to me," she said. "You used me."

"I haven't finished yet," Buck promised. "In fact I've barely started."

He moved from the door toward her, but she was prepared for him this time. As he touched her, and the smoke was made flesh again, she threw a blow toward him. Buck moved to avoid it, and she dodged past him toward the door. Her untied hair got in her eyes, but she virtually threw herself toward freedom. A cloudy hand snatched at her, but the grasp was too tenuous and slipped.

"I'll be waiting," Buck called after her as she stumbled across the walkway and into the storm. "You hear me, bitch? I'll be waiting!"

He wasn't going to humiliate himself with a pursuit. She would have to come back, wouldn't she? And he, invisible to all but the woman, could afford to bide his time. If she told her companions what she'd seen they'd call her crazy; maybe lock her up where he could have her all to himself. No, he had a winner here. She would return soaked to the skin, her dress clinging to her in a dozen fetching ways; panicky perhaps; tearful; too weak to resist his overtures. They'd make music then. Oh yes. Until she begged him to stop.

Sadie followed Laura May out.

"Where are you going?" Milton asked his daughter, but she didn't reply. "Jesus!" he shouted after her, registering what he'd seen. "Where'd you get the goddamn gun?"

The rain was torrential. It beat on the ground, on the last leaves of the cottonwood, on the roof, on the skull. It flattened Laura May's hair in seconds, pasting it to her forehead and neck.

"Earl?" she yelled. "Where are you? Earl?" She began to run across the lot, yelling his name as she went. The rain had turned the dust to a deep brown mud; it slopped up against her shins. She crossed to the other building. A number of guests, already woken by Gyer's barrage, watched her from their windows. Several doors were open. One man, standing on the walkway with a beer in his hand, demanded to know

what was going on. "People running around like crazies," he said. "All this yelling. We came here for some privacy for Christ's sake." A girl-fully twenty years his junior-emerged from the room behind the beer drinker. "She's got a gun, Dwayne," she said. "See that?" "Where did they go?" Laura May asked the beer drinker.

"Who?" Dwayne replied.

"The crazies!" Laura May yelled back above another peal of thunder.

"They went around the back of the office," Dwayne said, his eyes on the gun rather than Laura May. "They're not here. Really they're not."

Laura May doubled back toward the office building. The rain and lightning were blinding, and she had difficulty keeping her balance in the swamp underfoot.

"Earl!" she called. "Are you there?"

Sadie kept pace with her. The Cade woman had pluck, no doubt of that, but there was an edge of hysteria in her voice which Sadie didn't like too much. This kind of business (murder) required detachment. The trick was to do it almost casually, as you might flick on the radio, or swat a mosquito. Panic would only cloud the issue; passion the same. Why, when she'd raised that.38 and pointed it at Buck there'd been no anger to spoil her aim, not a trace. In the final analysis, that was why they'd sent her to the chair. Not for doing it, but for doing it too well. Laura May was not so cool. Her breath had become ragged, and from the way she sobbed Earl's name as she ran it was clear she was close to the breaking point. She rounded the back of the office building, where the motel sign threw a cold light on the waste ground, and this time, when she called for Earl, there was an answering cry. She stopped, peering through the veil of rain. It was Earl's voice, as she'd hoped, but he wasn't calling to her. "Bastard!" he was yelling, “You're out of your mind. Let me alone!"

Now she could make out two figures in the middle distance. Earl, his paunchy torso spattered and streaked with mud, was on his knees in among the soap weed and the scrub. Gyer stood over him, his hands on Earl's head, pressing it down toward the earth.

"Admit your crime, sinner!"

"Damn you, no!"

"You came to destroy my crusade. Admit it! Admit it!"

"Go to hell!"

"Confess your complicity, or so help me I'll break every bone in your body!"

Earl fought to be free of Gyer, but the evangelist was easily the stronger of the two men.

"Pray!" he said, pressing Earl's face into the mud. "Pray!"

"Go fuck yourself," Earl shouted back.

Gyer dragged Earl's head up by the hair, his other hand raised to deliver a blow to the upturned face. But before he could strike, Laura May entered the fray, taking three or four steps through the dirt toward them, the.38 held in her quaking hands.

"Get away from him," she demanded.

Sadie calmly noted that the woman's aim was not all it could be. Even in clear weather she was probably no sharpshooter. But here, under stress, in such a downpour, who but the most experienced marksman could guarantee the outcome? Gyer turned and looked at Laura May. He showed not a flicker of apprehension. He's made the same calculation I've just made, Sadie thought. He knows damn well the odds are against him getting harmed. "The whore!" Gyer announced, turning his eyes heavenward. "Do you see her, Lord? See her shame, her depravity? Mark her! She is one of the court of Babylon!"

Laura May didn't quite comprehend the details, but the general thrust of Gyer's outburst was perfectly clear. "I'm no whore!" she yelled back, the.38 almost leaping in her hand as if eager to be fired. "Don't you dare call me a whore!" "Please, Laura May…" Earl said, wrestling with Gyer to get a look at the woman,"… get out of here. He's lost his mind."

She ignored the imperative.

"If you don't let go of him she said, pointing the gun at the man in black.

"Yes?" Gyer taunted her. "What will you do, whore?"

"I'll shoot! I will! I'll shoot."

Over on the other side of the office building Virginia spotted one of the pill bottles Gyer had thrown out into the mud. She stooped to pick it up and then thought better of the idea. She didn't need pills any more, did she? She'd spoken to a dead man. Her very touch had made Buck Durning visible to her. What a skill that was! Her visions were real, and always had been; more true than all the secondhand revelations her pitiful husband could spout. What could pills do but befuddle this newfound talent? Let them lie.

A number of guests had now donned jackets and emerged from their rooms to see what the commotion was all about.

"Has there been an accident?" a woman called to Virginia. As the words left her lips a shot sounded. "John," Virginia said.

Before the echoes of the shot had died she was making her way toward their source. She already pictured what she would find there: her husband laid flat on the ground; the triumphant assassin taking to his muddied heels. She picked up her pace, a prayer coming as she ran. She prayed not that the scenario she had imagined was wrong, but rather that God would forgive her for willing it to be true.

The scene she found on the other side of the building confounded all her expectations. The evangelist was not dead. He was standing, untouched. It was Earl who lay flat on the miry ground beside him. Close by stood the woman who'd come with the ice water hours earlier. She had a gun in her hand. It still smoked. Even as Virginia's eyes settled on Laura May a figure stepped through the rain and struck the weapon from the woman's hand. It fell to the ground. Virginia followed the descent. Laura May looked startled. She clearly didn't understand how she'd come to drop the gun. Virginia knew, however. She could see the phantom, albeit fleetingly, and she guessed its identity. This was surely Sadie Durning, she whose defiance had christened this establishment the Slaughterhouse of Love. Laura May's eyes found Earl. She let out a cry of horror and ran towards him.

"Don't be dead, Earl. I beg you, don't be dead!"

Earl looked up from the mud bath he'd taken and shook his head.

"Missed me by a mile," he said.

At his side, Gyer had fallen to his knees, hands clasped together, face up to the driving rain.

"Oh Lord, I thank you for preserving this your instrument, in his

hour of need…"

Virginia shut out the idiot drivel. This was the man who had convinced her so deeply of her own deluded state that she'd given herself to Buck Durning. Well, no more. She'd been terrorized enough. She'd seen Sadie act upon the real world; she'd felt Buck do the same. The time was now ripe to reverse the procedure. She walked steadily across to where the.38 lay in the grass and picked it up.

As she did so, she sensed the presence of Sadie Durning close by. A voice, so soft she barely heard it, said, "Is this wise?" in her ear. Virginia didn't know the answer to that question. What was wisdom anyhow? Not the stale rhetoric of dead prophets, certainly. Maybe wisdom was Laura May and Earl, embracing in the mud, careless of the prayers Gyer was spouting, or of the stares of the guests who'd come running out to see who'd died. Or perhaps wisdom was finding the canker in your life and rooting it out once and for all. Gun in hand, she headed back toward Room Seven, aware that the benign presence of Sadie Durning walked at her side.

"Not Buck…?" Sadie whispered,"…surely not."

"He attacked me," Virginia said.

"You poor lamb."

"I'm no lamb," Virginia replied. "Not anymore."

Realizing that the woman was perfectly in charge of her destiny, Sadie hung back, fearful that her presence would alert Buck. She watched as Virginia crossed the lot, past the cottonwood tree, and stepped into the room where her tormentor had said he would be waiting. The lights still burned, bright after the blue darkness outside. There was no sign of Durning. Virginia crossed to the interconnecting door. Room Eight was deserted too. Then, the familiar voice.

"You came back," Buck said.

She wheeled around, hiding the gun from him. He had emerged from the bathroom and was standing between her and the door.

"I knew you'd come back," be said to her. "They always do."

"I want you to show yourself-" Virginia said.

"I'm naked as a babe as it is," said Buck, "what do you want me to

do: skin myself? Might be fun, at that." "Show yourself to John, my husband. Make him see his error."

"Oh, poor John. I don't think he wants to see me, do you?"

"He thinks I'm insane."

"Insanity can be very useful," Buck smirked, “they almost saved Sadie from Old Sparky on a plea of insanity. But she was too honest for her own good. She just kept telling them, over and over: "I wanted him dead. So I shot him." She never had much sense. But you… now, I think you know what's best for you."

The shadowy form shifted. Virginia couldn't quite make out what Durning was doing with himself but it was unequivocally obscene.

"Come and get it, Virginia," he said, “grub's up."

She took the.38 from behind her back and leveled it at him.

"Not this time," she said.

"You can't do me any harm with that," he replied. "I'm already dead, remember?"

"You hurt me. Why shouldn't I be able to hurt you back?"

Buck shook his ethereal head, letting out a low laugh. As he was so engaged the wail of police sirens rose from down the highway.

"Well, what do you know?" Buck said. "Such a fuss and commotion. We'd better get down to some jazzing, honey, before we get interrupted."

"I warn you, this is Sadie's gun-”You wouldn't hurt me," Buck murmured. "I know you women. You say one thing and you mean the opposite." He stepped toward her, laughing.

"Don't," she warned.

He took another step, and she pulled the trigger. In the instant before she heard the sound, and felt the gun leap in her hand, she saw John appear in the doorway. Had he been there all along, or was he coming out of the rain, prayers done, to read Revelations to his erring wife? She would never know. The bullet sliced through Buck, dividing the smoky body as it went, and sped with perfect accuracy toward the evangelist. He didn't see it coming. It struck him in the throat, and

blood came quickly, splashing down his shirt. Buck's form dissolved like so much dust, and he was gone. Suddenly there was nothing in Room Seven but Virginia, her dying husband and the sound of the rain. John Gyer frowned at Virginia, then reached out for the door frame to support his considerable bulk. He failed to secure it, and fell backward out of the door like a toppled statue, his face washed by the rain. The blood did not stop coming however. It poured out in gleeful spurts; and it was still pumping when Alvin Baker and his deputy arrived outside the room, guns at the ready.

Now her husband would never know, she thought. That was the pity of it. He could never now be made to concede his stupidity and recant his arrogance. Not this side of the grave, anyhow. He was safe, damn him, and she was left with a smoking gun in her hand and God alone knew what price to pay.

"Put down the gun and come out of there!" The voice from the lot sounded harsh and uncompromising. Virginia didn't answer.

"You hear me, in there? This is Sheriff Baker. The place is surrounded, so come on out, or you're dead." Virginia sat on the bed and weighed up the alternatives. They wouldn't execute her for what she'd done, the way they had Sadie. But she'd be in prison for a long time, and she was tired of regimes. If she wasn't mad now, incarceration would push her to the brink and over. Better to finish here, she thought. She put the warm.38 under her chin, tilting it to make sure the shot would take off the top of her skull.

"Is that wise?" Sadie inquired, as Virginia's finger tightened.

"They'll lock me away," she replied. "I couldn't face that."

"True," said Sadie. "They'll put you behind bars for a while. But it won't be for long."

"You must be joking. I just shot my husband in cold blood."

"You didn't mean to," Sadie said brightly, “you were aiming at Buck."

"W as I?" Virginia said. "I wonder."

"You can plead insanity, the way I should have done. Just make up the most outrageous story you can and stick to it." Virginia shook her head; she'd never been much of a liar. "And when you're set free," Sadie went on, “you'll be notorious. That's worth living for, isn't it?"

Virginia hadn't thought of that. The ghost of a smile illuminated her face. From outside, Sheriff Baker repeated his demand that she throw her weapon through the door and come out with her hands high.

"You've got ten seconds, lady," he said, “and I mean ten."

"I can't face the humiliation," Virginia murmured. "I can't."

Sadie shrugged. "Pity," she said. "The rain's clearing. There's a moon.

"A moon? Really?"

Baker had started counting.

"You have to make up your mind," Sadie said. "They'll shoot you given half the chance. And gladly." Baker had reached eight. Virginia stood up.

"Stop," she called through the door.

Baker stopped counting. Virginia threw out the gun. It landed in the mud.

"Good," said Sadie. "I'm so pleased."

"I can't go alone," Virginia replied.

"No need."

A sizeable audience had gathered in the lot: Earl and Laura May of course, Milton Cade, Dwayne and his girl, Sheriff Baker and his deputy, an assortment of motel guests. They stood in respectful silence, staring at Virginia Gyer with mingled expressions of bewilderment and awe.

"Put your hands up where I can see them!" Baker said. Virginia did as she was instructed. "Look," said Sadie, pointing.

The moon was up, wide and white.

"Why'd you kill him?" Dwayne's girl asked.

"The Devil made me do it," Virginia replied, gazing up at the moon and putting on the craziest smile she could muster.

XX: DOWN, SATAN!

Circumstances had made Gregorius rich beyond all calculation. He owned fleets and palaces; stallions; cities Indeed he owned so much that to those who were finally charged with enumerating his possessions-when the events of this story reached their monstrous conclusion-it sometimes seemed it might be quicker to list the items Gregorius did not own.

Rich he was, but far from happy. He had been raised a Catholic, and in his early years-before his dizzying rise to fortune-he'd found succor in his faith. But he'd neglected it, and it was only at the age of fifty-five, with the world at his feet, that he woke one night and found himself Godless.

It was a bitter blow, but he immediately took steps to make good his loss. He went to Rome and spoke with the Supreme Pontiff; he prayed night and day; he founded seminaries and leper colonies. God, however, declined to show so much as His toenail. Gregorius, it seemed, was forsaken.

Almost despairing, he took it into his head that he could only win his way back into the arms of his Maker if he put his soul into the direst jeopardy. The notion had some merit. Suppose, he thought, I could contrive a meeting with Satan, the Archfiend. Seeing me in extremis, would not God be obliged to step in and deliver me back into the fold? It was a fine plot, but how was he to realize it? The Devil did not just come at a call, even for a tycoon such as Gregorius, and his researches soon proved that all the traditional methods of summoning the Lord of Vermin-the defiling of the Blessed Sacrament, the sacrificing of babes-were no more effective than his good works had been at provoking Yahweh. It was only after a year of deliberation that he finally fell upon his master plan. He would arrange to have built a hell on earth-a modern inferno so monstrous that the Tempter would be tempted, and come to roost there like a cuckoo in a usurped nest.

He searched high and low for an architect and found, languishing in a madhouse outside Florence, a man called Leopardo, whose plans for Mussolini's palaces had a lunatic grandeur that suited Gregorius's project perfectly. Leopardo was taken from his cell-a fetid, wretched old man-and given his dreams again. His genius for the prodigious had not deserted him.

In order to fuel his invention the great libraries of the world were scoured for descriptions of hells both secular and metaphysical. Museum vaults were ransacked for forbidden images of martyrdom. No stone was left unturned if it was suspected something perverse was concealed beneath.

The finished designs owed something to de Sade and to Dante, and something more to Freud and Krafft-Ebing, but there was also much there that no mind had conceived of before, or at least ever dared set to paper. A site in North Africa was chosen, and work on Gregorius's New Hell began. Everything about the project broke the records. Its foundations were vaster, its walls thicker, its plumbing more elaborate than any edifice hitherto attempted. Gregorius watched its slow construction with an enthusiasm he had not tasted since his first years as an empire builder. Needless to say, he was widely thought to have lost his mind. Friends he had known for years refused to associate with him. Several of his companies collapsed when investors took fright at reports of his insanity. He didn't care. His plan could not fail. The Devil would be bound to come, if only out of curiosity to see this leviathan built in his name, and when he did, Gregorius would be waiting.

The work took four years and the better part of Gregorius's fortune. The finished building was the size of half a dozen cathedrals and boasted every facility the Angel of the Pit could desire. Fires burned behind its walls, so that to walk in many of its corridors was almost unendurable agony. The rooms off those corridors were fitted with every imaginable device of persecution-the needle, the rack, the dark-that the genius of Satan's torturers be given fair employ. There were ovens large enough to cremate families; pools deep enough to drown generations. The New Hell was an atrocity waiting to happen; a celebration of inhumanity that only lacked its first cause.

The builders withdrew and thankfully. It was rumored among them that Satan had long been watching over the construction of his pleasure dome. Some even claimed to have glimpsed him on the deeper levels, where the chill was so profound it froze the piss in your bladder. There was some evidence to support the belief in supernatural presences converging on the building as it neared completion, not least the cruel death of Leopardo, who had either thrown himself or-the superstitious argued-been pitched through his sixth-story hotel window. He was buried with due extravagance.

So now alone in hell, Gregorius waited.

He did not have to wait long. He had been there a day, no more, when he heard noises from the lower depths. Anticipation brimming, he went in search of their source, but found only the roiling of excrement baths and the rattling of ovens. He returned to his suite of chambers on the ninth level and waited. The noises came again; again he went in search of their source; again he came away disappointed.

The disturbances did not abate, however. In the days that followed scarcely ten minutes would pass without his hearing some sound 9f occupancy. The Prince of Darkness was here, Gregorius could have no doubt of it, but he was keeping to the shadows. Gregorius was content to play along. It was the Devil's party, after all. His to play whatever game he chose.

But during the long and often lonely months that followed, Gregorius wearied of this hide-and-seek and began to demand that Satan show himself. His voice rang unanswered down the deserted corridors, however, until his throat was bruised with shouting. Thereafter he went about his searches stealthily, hoping to catch his tenant unawares. But the Apostate Angel always flitted away before Gregorius could step within sight of him.

They would play a waiting game, it seemed, he and Satan, chasing each other's tails through ice and fire and ice again. Gregorius told himself to be patient. The Devil had come, hadn't he? Wasn't that his fingerprint on the door handle? His turd on the stairs? Sooner or later the Fiend would show his face, and Gregorius would spit on it.

The world outside went on its way, and Gregorius was consigned to the company of other recluses who had been ruined by wealth. His Folly, as it was known, was not entirely without visitors, however. There were a few who had loved him too much to forget him-a few, also, who had profited by him and hoped to turn his madness to their further profit-who dared the gates of the New Hell. These visitors made the journey without announcing their intentions, fearing the disapproval of their friends. The investigations into their subsequent disappearance never reached as far as North Africa. And in his folly Gregorius still chased the Serpent, and the Serpent still eluded him, leaving only more and more terrible signs of his occupancy as the months went by.

It was the wife of one of the missing visitors who finally discovered the truth and alerted the authorities. Gregorius's Folly was put under surveillance, and finally-some three years after its completion-a quartet of officers braved the threshold.

Without maintenance the Folly had begun to deteriorate badly. The lights had failed on many of the levels, its walls had cooled, its pitch pits solidified. But as the officers advanced through the gloomy vaults in search of Gregorius they came upon ample evidence that despite its decrepit condition the New Hell was in good working order. There were bodies in the ovens, their faces wide and black. There were human remains seated and strung up in many of the rooms, gouged and pricked and slit to death.

Their terror grew with every door they pressed open, every new abomination their fevered eyes fell upon. Two of the four who crossed the threshold never reached the chamber at its center. Terror overtook them on their way and they fled, only to be waylaid in some choked passageway and added to the hundreds who had perished in the Folly since Satan had taken residence.

Of the pair who finally unearthed the perpetrator, only one had courage enough to tell his story, though the scenes he faced there in the Folly's heart were almost too terrible to bear relating.

There was no sign of Satan, of course. There was only Gregorius. The master builder, finding no one to inhabit the house he had sweated over, had occupied it himself He had with him a few disciples whom he'd mustered over the years. They, like him, seemed unremarkable creatures. But there was not a torture device in the building they had not made thorough and merciless use of.

Gregorius did not resist his arrest. Indeed he seemed pleased to have a platform from which to boast of his butcheries. Then, and later at his trial, he spoke freely of his ambition and his appetite; and of how much more blood he would spill if they would only set him free to do so. Enough to drown all belief and its delusions, he swore. And still he would not be satisfied. For God was rotting in paradise, and Satan in the abyss, and who was to stop him? He was much reviled during the trial, and later in the asylum where, under some suspicious circumstances, he died barely two months later. The Vatican expunged all report of him from its records. The seminaries founded in his unholy name were dissolved.

But there were those, even among the cardinals, who could not put his unrepentant malice out of their heads, and-in the privacy of their doubt-wondered if he had not succeeded in his strategy. If, in giving up all hope of angels-fallen or otherwise-he had not become one himself.

Or all that earth could bear of such phenomena.

XXI: THE AGE OF DESIRE

The burning man propelled himself down the steps of the Hume Laboratories as the police car-summoned, he presumed, by the alarm either Welles or Dance had set off upstairs-appeared at the gate and swung up the driveway As he ran from the door the car screeched up to the steps and discharged its human cargo. He waited in the shadows, too exhausted by terror to run any farther, certain that they would see him. But they disappeared through the swing doors without so much as a glance toward his torment. Am I on fire at all? he wondered. Was this horrifying spectacle-his flesh baptized with a polished flame that seared but failed to consume-simply a hallucination, for his eyes and his eyes only? If so, perhaps all that he had suffered up in the laboratory had also been delirium. Perhaps he had not truly committed the crimes he had fled from, the heat in his flesh licking him into ecstasies. He looked down his body. His exposed skin still crawled with livid dots of fire, but one by one they were being extinguished. He was going out, he realized, like a neglected bonfire. The sensations that had suffused him-so intense and so demanding that they had been as like pain as pleasure-were finally deserting his nerve endings, leaving a numbness for which he was grateful. His body, now appearing from beneath the veil of fire, was in a sorry condition. His skin was a panic-map of scratches, his clothes torn to shreds, his hands sticky with coagulating blood; blood, he knew, that was not his own. There was no avoiding the bitter truth. He had done all he had imagined doing. Even now the officers would be staring down at his atrocious handiwork.

He crept away from his niche beside the door and down the driveway, keeping a lookout for the return of the two policemen. Neither reappeared. Tile street beyond the gate was deserted. He started to run. He had managed only a few paces when the alarm in the building behind him was abruptly cut off. For several seconds his ears rang in sympathy with the silenced bell. Then, eerily, he began to hear the sound of heat-the surreptitious murmuring of embers-distant enough that he didn't panic, yet close as his heartbeat.

He limped on to put as much distance as he could between him and his felonies before they' were discovered. But however fast he ran, the heat went with him, safe in some backwater of his gut, threatening with every desperate step he took to ignite him afresh.

It took Dooley several seconds to identify the cacophony he was

hearing from the upper floor now that McBride had hushed the alarm bell. It was the high-pitched chattering of monkeys, and it came from one of the many rooms down the corridor to his right.

"Virgil," he called down the stairwell. "Get up here."

Not waiting for his partner to join him, Dooley headed off toward the source of the din. Halfway along the corridor the smell of static and new carpeting gave way to a more pungent combination: urine, disinfectant and rotting fruit. Dooley slowed his advance. He didn't like the smell any more than he liked the hysteria in the babble of monkey voices. But McBride was slow in answering his call, and after a short hesitation, Dooley's curiosity got the better of his disquiet. Hand on truncheon he approached the open door and stepped in. His appearance sparked off another wave of frenzy from the animals, a dozen or so rhesus monkeys. They threw themselves around in their cages, somersaulting, screeching and berating the wire mesh. Their excitement was infectious. Dooley could feel the sweat begin to squeeze from his pores.

"Is there anybody here?" he called out.

The only reply came from the prisoners: more hysteria, more cage rattling. He stared across the room at them. They stared back, their teeth bared in fear or welcome; Dooley didn't know which, nor did he wish to test their intentions. He kept well clear of the bench on which the cages were lined up as he began a perfunctory search of the laboratory. "I wondered what the hell the smell was," McBride said, appearing at the door.

"Just animals," Dooley replied.

"Don't they ever wash? Filthy buggers."

"Anything downstairs?"

"Nope," McBride said, crossing to the cages. The monkeys met his advance with more gymnastics. "Just the alarm." "Nothing up here either," Dooley said. He was about to add, "Don't do that," to prevent his partner putting his finger to the mesh, but before the words were out one of the animals seized the proffered digit and bit it. McBride wrested his finger free and threw a blow back against the mesh in retaliation. Squealing its anger, the occupant flung its scrawny body about in a lunatic fandango that threatened to pitch cage and monkey alike onto the floor. "You'll need a tetanus shot for that," Dooley commented.

"Shit!" said McBride, “what's wrong with the little bastard anyhow?"

"Maybe they don't like strangers."

"They're out of their tiny minds." McBride sucked ruminatively on his finger, then spat. "I mean, look at them." Dooley didn't answer.

"I said, look McBride repeated.

Very quietly, Dooley said: "Over here."

"'What is it?"

"Just come over here."

McBride drew his gaze from the row of cages and across the cluttered work surfaces to where Dooley was staring at the ground, the look on his face one of fascinated revulsion. McBride neglected his finger sucking and threaded his way among the benches and stools to where his partner stood.

"Under there," Dooley murmured.

On the scuffed floor at Dooley's feet was a woman's beige shoe; beneath the bench was the shoe's owner. To judge by her cramped position she had either been secreted there by the miscreant or dragged herself out of sight and died in hiding.

"Is she dead?" McBride asked.

"Look at her, for Christ's sake," Dooley replied, “she's been torn open."

"We've got to check for vital signs," McBride reminded him. Dooley made no move to comply, so McBride squatted down in front of the victim and checked for a pulse at her ravaged neck. There was none. Her skin was still warm beneath his fingers however. A gloss of saliva on her cheek had not yet dried.

Dooley, calling in his report, looked down at the deceased. The worst of her wounds, on the upper torso, were masked by McBride's crouching body. All he could see was a fall of auburn hair and her legs, one foot shoeless, protruding from her hiding place. They were beautiful legs, he thought. He might have whistled after such legs once upon a time.

"She's a doctor or a technician," McBride said. "She's wearing a lab

coat." Or she had been. In fact the coat had been ripped open, as had the layers of clothing beneath, and then, as if to complete the exhibition, the skin and muscle beneath that. McBride peered into her chest. The sternum had been snapped and the heart teased from its seat, as if her killer had wanted to take it as a keepsake and been interrupted in the act. He perused her without squeamishness; he had always prided himself on his strong stomach.

"Are you satisfied she's dead?"

"Never saw deader."

"Carnegie's coming down," Dooley said, crossing to one of the sinks. Careless of fingerprints, he turned on the tap and splashed a handful of cold water onto his face. When he looked up from his ablutions McBride had left off his tкte-a-tкte with the corpse and was walking down the laboratory toward a bank of machinery.

"What do they do here, for Christ's sake?" he remarked. "Look at all this stuff."

"Some kind of research facility," Dooley said.

"What do they research?"

"How the hell do I know?" Dooley snapped. The ceaseless chatterings of the monkeys and the proximity of the dead woman made him want to desert the place. "Let's leave it be, huh?"

McBride ignored Dooley's request; equipment fascinated him. He stared entranced at the encephalograph and electrocardiograph; at the printout units still disgorging yards of blank paper onto the floor; at the video display monitors and the consoles. The scene brought the Marie Celeste to his mind. This was like some deserted ship of science-still humming some tuneless song to itself as it sailed on, though there was neither captain nor crew left behind to attend upon it.

Beyond the wall of equipment was a window, no more than a yard square. McBride had assumed it let on to the exterior of the building, but now that he looked more closely he realized it did not. A test chamber lay beyond the banked units.

"Dooley…?" he said, glancing around. The man had gone, however, down to meet Carnegie presumably. Content to be left to his exploration, McBride returned his attention to the window. There was no light on inside. Curious, he walked around the back of the banked

equipment until he found the chamber door. It was ajar. Without hesitation, he stepped through.

Most of the light through the window was blocked by the instruments on the other side; the interior was dark. It took McBride's eyes a few seconds to get a true impression of the chaos the chamber contained: the overturned table; the chair of which somebody had made matchwood; the tangle of cables and demolished equipment-cameras, perhaps, to monitor proceedings in the chamber?-clusters of lights which had been similarly smashed. No professional vandal could have made a more thorough job of breaking up the chamber than had been made.

There was a smell in the air which McBride recognized but, irritatingly, couldn't place. He stood still, tantalized by the scent. The sound of sirens rose from down the corridor outside; Carnegie would be here in moments. Suddenly, the smell's association came to him. It was the same scent that twitched in his nostrils when, after making love to Jessica and-as was his ritual-washing himself, he returned from the bathroom to bedroom. It was the smell of sex. He smiled.

His face was still registering pleasure when a heavy object sliced through the air and met his nose. He felt the cartilage give and a rush of blood come. He took two or three giddy steps backward, thereby avoiding the subsequent slice, but lost his footing in the disarray. He fell awkwardly in a litter of glass shards and looked up to see his assailant, wielding a metal bar, moving toward him. The man's face resembled one of the monkeys; the same yellowed teeth, the same rabid eyes. "No!" the man shouted, as he brought his makeshift club down on McBride, who managed to ward off the blow with his arm, snatching at the weapon in so doing. The attack had taken him unawares but how, with the pain in his mashed nose to add fury to his response, he was more than the equal of the aggressor. He plucked the club from the man, sweets from a babe, and leaped, roaring, to his feet. Any precepts he might once have been taught about arrest techniques had fled from his mind. He lay a hail of blows on the man's head and shoulders, forcing him backward across the chamber. The man cowered beneath the assault and eventually slumped, whimpering, against the wall. Only now, with his antagonist abused to the verge of unconsciousness, did McBride's furor falter. He stood in the middle of the chamber, gasping for breath, and watched the beaten man slip down the wall. He had made a profound error. The assailant, he now realized, was dressed in a white laboratory coat. He was, as Dooley was irritatingly fond of saying, on the side of the angels.

"Damn," said McBride, “hit, hell and damn."

The man's eyes flickered open, and he gazed up at McBride. His grasp on consciousness was evidently tenuous, but a look of recognition crossed his wide-browed, somber face. Or rather, recognition's absence.

"You're not him," he murmured.

"Who?" said McBride, realizing he might yet salvage his reputation from this fiasco if he could squeeze a clue from the witness, "Who did you think I was?"

The man opened his mouth, but no words emerged. Eager to hear the testimony, McBride crouched beside him and said: "Who did you think you were attacking?"

Again the mouth opened; again no audible words emerged. McBride pressed his suit. "It's important," he said, “just tell me who was here."

The man strove to voice his reply. McBride pressed his ear to the trembling mouth, "In a pig's eye," the man said, then passed out, leaving McBride to curse his father, who'd bequeathed him a temper he was afraid he would probably live to regret. But then, what was living for?

Inspector Carnegie was used to boredom. For every rare moment of genuine discovery his professional life had furnished him with, he had endured hour upon hour of waiting for bodies to be photographed and examined, for lawyers to be bargained with and suspects intimidated. He had long ago given up attempting to fight this tide of ennui and, after his fashion, had learned the art of going with the flow. The processes of investigation could not be hurried. The wise man, he had come to appreciate, let the pathologists, the lawyers and all their tribes have their tardy way. All that mattered, in the fullness of time, was that the finger be pointed and that the guilty quake. Now, with the clock on the laboratory wall reading twelve fifty-three a.m., and even the monkeys hushed in their cages, he sat at one of the benches and waited for Hendrix to finish his calculations. The surgeon consulted the thermometer, then stripped off his gloves like a second skin and threw them down onto the sheet on which the deceased lay. "It's always difficult," the doctor said, “fixing time of death. She's lost less than three degrees. I'd say she's been dead under two hours."

"The officers arrived at a quarter to twelve," Carnegie said, “so she died maybe half an hour before that?" "Something of that order."

"Was she put in there?" he asked, indicating the place beneath the bench.

"Oh certainly. There's no way she hid herself away. Not with those injuries. They're quite something, aren't they?" Carnegie stared at Hendrix. The man had presumably seen hundreds of corpses, in every conceivable condition, but the enthusiasm in his pinched features was unqualified. Carnegie found that mystery more fascinating in its way than that of the dead woman and her slaughterer. How could anyone possibly enjoy taking the rectal temperature of a corpse? It confounded him. But the pleasure was there, gleaming in the man's eyes.

"Motive?" Carnegie asked.

"Pretty explicit, isn't it? Rape. There's been very thorough molestation; contusions around the vagina; copious semen deposits. Plenty to work with."

"And the wounds on her torso?"

"Ragged. Tears more than cuts."

"Weapon?"

"Don't know." Hendrix made an inverted U of his mouth. "I mean, the flesh has been mauled. If it weren't for the rape evidence I'd be tempted to suggest an animal."

"Dog, you mean?"

"I was thinking more of a tiger," Hendrix said.

Carnegie frowned. "Tiger?"

"Joke," Hendrix replied, "I was making a joke, Carnegie. My Christ, do you have any sense of irony?" "This isn't funny," Carnegie said.

"I'm not laughing," Hendrix replied with a sour look.

"The man McBride found in the test chamber?"

"What about him?"

"Suspect?"

"Not in a thousand years. We're looking for a maniac, Carnegie. Big,

strong. Wild."

"And the wounding? Before or after?"

Hendrix scowled. "I don't know. Postmortem will give us more. But for what it's worth, I think our man was in a frenzy. I'd say the wounding and the rape were probably simultaneous."

Carnegie's normally phlegmatic features registered something close to shock. "Simultaneous?" Hendrix shrugged. "Lust's a funny thing," he said. "Hilarious," came the appalled reply.

As was his wont, Carnegie had his driver deposit him half a mile from his doorstep to allow him a head-clearing walk before home, hot chocolate and slumber. The ritual was observed religiously, even when the Inspector was dog-tired. He used to stroll to wind down before stepping over the threshold. Long experience had taught him that taking his professional concerns into the house assisted neither the investigation nor his domestic life. He had learned the lesson too late to keep his wife from leaving him and his children from estrangement, but he applied the principle still.

Tonight, he walked slowly to allow the distressing scenes the evening had brought to recede somewhat. The route took him past a small cinema which, he had read in the local press, was soon to be demolished. He was not surprised. Though he was no cineaste the fare the flea pit provided had degenerated in recent years. The week's offering was a case in point: a double bill of horror movies. Lurid and derivative stuff to judge by the posters, with their crude graphics and their unashamed hyperbole. "You May Never Sleep Again.'" one of the hook lines read; and beneath it a woman-very much awake-cowered in the shadow of a two-headed man. What trivial images the populists conjured to stir some fear in their audiences. The walking dead; nature grown vast and rampant in a miniature world; blood drinkers, omens, fire walkers, thunderstorms and all the other foolishness the public cowered before. It was all so laughably trite. Among that catalogue of penny dreadful there wasn't one that equaled the banality of human appetite, which horror (or the consequences of same) he saw every week of his working life. Thinking of it, his mind thumbed through a dozen snapshots: the dead by torchlight, face down and thrashed to oblivion; and the living too, meeting his mind's eye with hunger in theirs-for sex, for narcotics, for others' pain. Why didn't they put that on the posters?

As he reached his home a child squealed in the shadows beside his

garage; the cry stopped him in his tracks. It came again, and this time he recognized it for what it was. No child at all but a cat, or cats, exchanging love calls in the darkened passageway. He went to the place to shoo them off. Their venereal secretions made the passage stink. He didn't need to yell; his footfall was sufficient to scare them away. They darted in all directions, not two, but half a dozen of them. A veritable orgy had been underway apparently. He had arrived on the spot too late however. The stench of their seductions was overpowering.

Carnegie looked blankly at the elaborate setup of monitors and video recorders that dominated his office. "What in Christ's name is this about?" he wanted to know.

"The video tapes," said Boyle, his number two, “from the laboratory. I think you ought to have a look at them, sir." Though they had worked in tandem for seven months, Boyle was not one of Carnegie's favorite officers; you could practically smell the ambition off his smooth hide. In someone half his age again such greed would have been objectionable. In a man of thirty it verged on the obscene. This present display-the mustering of equipment ready to confront Carnegie when he walked in at eight in the morning-was just Boyle's style: flashy and redundant. "Why so many screens?" Carnegie asked acidly. "Do I get it in stereo, too?"

"They had three cameras running simultaneously, sir. Covering the experiment from several angles." "What experiment?"

Boyle gestured for his superior to sit down. Obsequious to a fault aren't you? thought Carnegie; much good it'll do you.

"Right," Boyle instructed the technician at the recorders, “roll the tapes."

Carnegie sipped at the cup of hot chocolate he had brought in with him. The beverage was a weakness of his, verging on addiction. On the days when the machine supplying it broke down he was an unhappy man indeed. He looked at the three screens. Suddenly, a title.

"Project Blind Boy," the words read. "Restricted."

"Blind Boy?" said Carnegie. "What, or who, is that?"

"It's obviously a code word of some kind," Boyle said.

"Blind Boy. Blind Boy." Carnegie repeated the phrase as if to beat it

into submission, but before he could solve the problem the images on the three monitors diverged. They pictured the same subject-a bespectacled male in his late twenties sitting in a chair-but each showed the scene from a different angle. One took in the subject full length and in profile; the second was a three-quarter medium-shot, angled from above; the third a straightforward close-up of the subject's head and shoulders, shot through the glass of the test chamber and from the front. The three images were in black and white, and none were completely centered or focused. Indeed, as the tapes began to run somebody was still adjusting such technicalities. A backwash of informal chatter ran between the subject and the woman recognizable even in brief glimpses as the deceased-who was applying electrodes to his forehead. Much of the talk between them was difficult to catch; the acoustics in the chamber frustrated microphone and listener alike. "The woman's Doctor Dance," Boyle offered. "The victim."

"Yes," said Carnegie, watching the screens intently, "I recognize her. How long does this preparation go on for?" "Quite a while. Most of it's unedifying."

"Well, get to the edifying stuff, then."

"Fast forward," Boyle said. The technician obliged, and the actors on the three screens became squeaking comedians. "Wait!" said Boyle. "Back up a short way." Again, the technician did as instructed. "There!" said Boyle. "Stop there. Now run on at normal speed." The action settled back to its natural pace. "This is where it really begins, sir."

Carnegie had come to the end of his hot chocolate. He put his finger into the soft sludge at the bottom of the cup, delivering the sickly-sweet dregs to his tongue. On the screens Doctor Dance had approached the subject with a syringe, was now swabbing the crook of his elbow, and injecting him. Not for the first time since his visit to the Hume Laboratories did Carnegie wonder precisely what they did at the establishment. Was this kind of procedure de rigueur in pharmaceutical research? The implicit secrecy of the experiment-late at night in an otherwise deserted building-suggested not. And there was that imperative on the title card-”Restricted." What they were watching had clearly never been intended for public viewing.

"Are you comfortable?" a man off camera now inquired. The subject nodded. His glasses had been removed and he looked slightly bemused without them. An unremarkable face, thought Carnegie; the subject-as yet unnamed-was neither Adonis nor Quasimodo. He was receding

slightly, and his wispy, dirty-blond hair touched his shoulders. "I'm fine, Doctor Welles," he replied to the off-camera questioner.

"You don't feel hot at all? Sweaty?"

"Not really," the guinea pig replied, slightly apologetically."1 feel ordinary."

That you are, Carnegie thought; then to Boyle: "Have you been through the tapes to the end?" "No, sir," Boyle replied. "I thought you'd want to see them first. I only ran them as far as the injection." "Any word from the hospital on Doctor Welles?"

"At the last call he was still comatose."

Carnegie grunted and returned his attention to the screens. Following the burst of action with the injection the tapes now settled into non-activity: the three cameras fixed on their shortsighted subject with beady stares, the torpor occasionally interrupted by an inquiry from Welles as to the subject's condition. It remained the same. After three or four minutes of this eventless study even his occasional blinks began to assume major dramatic significance. "Don't think much of the plot," the technician commented. Carnegie laughed; Boyle looked discomforted. Two or three more minutes passed in a similar manner.

"This doesn't look too hopeful," Carnegie said."'Run through it at speed, will you?"

The technician was about to obey when Boyle said: "Wait." Carnegie glanced across at the man, irritated by his intervention, and then back at the screens. Something was happening. A subtle transformation had overtaken the insipid features of the subject. He had begun to smile to himself and was sinking down in his chair as if submerging his gangling body in a warm bath. His eyes, which had so far expressed little but affable indifference, now began to flicker closed, and then, once closed, opened again. When they did so there was a quality in them not previously visible, a hunger that seemed to reach out from the screen and into the calm of the inspector's office. Carnegie put down his chocolate cup and approached the screens. As he did so the subject also got up out of his chair and walked toward the glass of the chamber, leaving two of the cameras' ranges. The third still recorded him, however, as he pressed his face against the window, and for a moment the two men faced each other through layers of glass and time, seemingly meeting each other's gaze.

The look on the man's face was critical now, the hunger was rapidly

outgrowing sane control. Eyes burning, he laid his lips against the chamber window and kissed it, his tongue working against the glass.

"What in Christ's name is going on?" Carnegie said.

A prattle of voices had begun on the soundtrack. Doctor Welles was vainly asking the testee to articulate his feelings while Dance called off figures from the various monitoring instruments. It was difficult to hear much clearly-the din was further supplemented by an eruption of chatter from the caged monkeys-but it was evident that the readings coming through from the man's body were escalating. His face was flushed, his skin gleamed with a sudden sweat he resembled a martyr with the tinder at his feet freshly lit, wild with a fatal ecstasy. He stopped French-kissing the window, tearing off the electrodes at his temples and the sensors from his arms and chest. Dance, her voice now registering alarm, called out for him to stop. Then she moved across the camera's view and out again crossing, Carnegie presumed, to the chamber door.

"Better not," he said, as if this drama were played out at his behest, and at a whim he could prevent the tragedy. But the woman took no notice. A moment later she appeared in long shot as she stepped into the chamber. The man moved to greet her, throwing over equipment as he did so. She called out to him-his name, perhaps. If so, it was inaudible over the monkeys' hullabaloo. "Shit," said Carnegie, as the testee's flailing arms caught first the profile camera, and then the three-quarter medium-shot. Two of the three monitors went dead. Only' the head-on shot, the camera safe outside the chamber, still recorded events, but the tightness of the shot precluded more than an occasional glimpse of a moving body. Instead, the camera's sober eye gazed on, almost ironically, at the saliva smeared glass of the chamber window, blind to the atrocities being committed a few feet out of range. "What in Christ's name did they give him?" Carnegie said, as somewhere off camera the woman's screams rose over the screeching of the apes.

Jerome woke in the early afternoon feeling hungry and sore. When he threw the sheet off his body he was appalled at his state. His torso was scored with scratches, and his groin region was red-raw. Wincing, he moved to the edge of the bed and sat there for a while, trying to piece the previous evening back together again. He remembered going to the laboratories, but very little after that. He had been a paid guinea pig for several months, giving of his blood, comfort and patience to supplement his meager earnings as a translator. The arrangement had begun courtesy of a friend who did similar work, but

whereas Figley had been part of the laboratories' mainstream program, Jerome had been approached after one week at the place by Doctors Welles and Dance, who had invited him-subject to a series of psychological tests-to work exclusively for them. It had been made clear from the outset that their project (he had never even been told its purpose) was of a secret nature, and that they would demand his total dedication and discretion. He had needed the funds, and the recompense they offered was marginally better than that paid by the laboratories, so he had agreed, although the hours they had demanded of him were unsociable. For several weeks now he had been required to attend the research facility late at night and often working into the small hours of the morning as he endured Welles's interminable questions about his private life and Dance's glassy stare.

Thinking of her cold look, he felt a tremor in him. Was it because once he had fooled himself that she had looked upon him more fondly than a doctor need? Such self-deception, he chided himself was pitiful. He was not the stuff of which women dreamed, and each day he walked the streets reinforced that conviction. He could not remember one occasion in his' adult life when a woman had looked his way, and kept looking; a time when an appreciative glance of his had been returned. Why this should bother him now he wasn't certain. His loveless condition was, he knew, commonplace. And nature had been kind. Knowing, it seemed, that the gift of allurement had passed him by, it had seen fit to minimize his libido. Weeks passed without his conscious thoughts mourning his enforced chastity. Once in a while, when he heard the pipes roar, he might wonder what Mrs. Morrisey, his landlady, looked like in her bath; might imagine the firmness of her soapy breasts, or the dark divide of her rump as she stooped to put talcum powder between her toes. But such torments were, blissfully, infrequent. And when his cup brimmed he would pocket the money he had saved from his sessions at the laboratories and buy an hour's companionship from a woman called Angela (he'd never learned her second name) on Greek Street.

It would be several weeks before he did so again, he thought. Whatever he had done last night, or, more correctly, had done to him, the bruises alone had nearly crippled him. The only plausible explanation-though he couldn't recall any details-was that he'd been beaten up on the way back from the laboratories. Either that, or he'd stepped into a bar and somebody had picked a fight with him. It had happened before, on occasion. He had one of those faces that woke the bully in drunkards.

He stood up and hobbled to the small bathroom adjoining his room.

His glasses were missing from their normal spot beside the shaving mirror and his reflection was woefully blurred, but it was apparent that his face was as badly scratched as the rest of his anatomy. And more: a clump of hair had been pulled out from above his left ear; clotted blood ran down to his neck. Painfully, he bent to the task of cleaning his wounds, then bathing them in a stinging solution of antiseptic. That done, he returned into his room to seek out his spectacles. But search as he might he could not locate them. Cursing his idiocy, he rooted among his belongings for his old pair and found them. Their prescription was out of date-his eyes had worsened considerably since he'd worn them-but they at least brought his surroundings into a dreamy kind of focus.

An indisputable melancholy had crept up on him, compounded of his pain and those unwelcome thoughts of Mrs. Morrisey. To keep its intimacy at bay he turned on the radio. A sleek voice emerged, purveying the usual palliatives. Jerome had always had contempt for popular music and its apologists, but now, as he mooched around the small room, unwilling to clothe himself with chafing weaves when his scratches still pained him, the songs began to stir something other than scorn in him. It was as though he were hearing the words and music for the first time, as though all his life he had been deaf to their sentiments. Enthralled, he forgot his pain and listened. The songs told one seamless and obsessive story: of love lost and found, only to be lost again. The lyricists filled the airwaves with metaphor-much of it ludicrous, but no less potent for that. Of paradise, of hearts on fire; of birds, bells, journeys, sunsets; of passion as lunacy, as flight, as unimaginable treasure. The songs did not calm him with their fatuous sentiments. They flayed him, evoking, despite feeble rhyme and trite melody, a world bewitched by desire. He began to tremble. His eyes, strained (or so he reasoned) by the unfamiliar spectacles, began to delude him. It seemed as though he could see traces of light in his skin, sparks flying from the ends of his fingers.

He stared at his hands and arms. The illusion, far from retreating in the face of this scrutiny, increased. Beads of brightness, like the traces of fire in ash, began to climb through his veins, multiplying even as he watched. Curiously, he felt no distress. This burgeoning fire merely reflected the passion in the story the songs were telling him. Love, they said, was in the air, around every corner, waiting to be found. He thought again of the widow Morrissey in the flat below him, going about her business, sighing, no doubt, as he had done; awaiting her hero. The more he thought of her the more inflamed he became. She would not reject him, of that the songs convinced him. Or if she did he must press his case until (again, as the songs promised) she

surrendered to him. Suddenly, at the thought of her surrender, the fire engulfed him. Laughing, he left the radio singing behind him and made his way downstairs.

It had taken the best part of the morning to assemble a list of testees employed at the laboratories. Carnegie had sensed a reluctance on the part of the establishment to open their files to the investigation despite the horror that had been committed on its premises. Finally, lust after noon, they had presented him with a hastily assembled who's who of subjects, four and a half dozen in toto, and their addresses. None, the offices claimed, matched the description of Welles's testee. The doctors, it was explained, had been clearly using laboratory facilities to work on private projects. Though this was not encouraged, both had been senior researchers, and allowed leeway on the matter. It was likely, therefore, that the man Carnegie was seeking had never even been on the laboratories' payroll. Undaunted, Carnegie ordered a selection of photographs taken off the video recording and had them distributed-with the list of names and addresses-to his officers. From then on it was down to footwork and patience.

Leo Boyle ran his finger down the list of names he had been given. "Another fourteen," he said. His driver grunted, and Boyle glanced across at him. "You were McBride's partner, weren't you?" he said.

"That's right," Dooley replied. "He's been suspended."

"Why?"

Dooley scowled. "Lacks finesse, that Virgil. Can't get the hang of arrest technique."

Dooley drew the car to a halt.

"Is this it?" Boyle asked.

"You said number eighty. This is eighty. On the door. Eight. Oh."

"I've got eyes."

Boyle got out of the car and made his way up the pathway. The house was sizeable, and had been divided into flats. There were several bells. He pressed for J. Tredgold-the name on his list-and waited. Of the five houses they had so far visited, two had been unoccupied and the residents of the other three had born no resemblance to the malefactor. Boyle waited on the step a few seconds and then pressed the bell again; a longer ring this time. "Nobody in,"

Dooley said from the pavement.

"Looks like it." Even as he spoke Boyle caught sight of a figure flitting across the hallway, its outline distorted by the cobblestone glass in the door. "Wait a minute," he said.

"What is it?"

"Somebody's in there and not answering." He pressed the first bell again, and then the others. Dooley approached up the pathway, flicking away an over attentive wasp.

"You sure?" he said.

"I saw somebody in there."

"Press the other bells," Dooley suggested.

"I already did. There's somebody in there and they don't want to come to the door." He rapped on the glass. "Open up," he announced. "Police."

Clever, thought Dooley; why not a loudspeaker, so heaven knows too? When the door, predictably, remained unanswered, Boyle turned to Dooley. "Is there a side gate?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get around the back, pronto, before he's away.

"Shouldn't we call-?"

"Do it? I'll keep watch here. If you can get in the back come through and open the front door." Dooley moved, leaving Boyle alone at the front door. He rang the series of bells again and, cupping his hand to his brow, put his face to the glass. There was no sign of movement in the hallway. Was it possible that the bird had already flown? He backed down the path and stared up at the windows; they stared back vacuously. Ample time had now passed for Dooley to get around the back of the house, but so far he had neither reappeared nor called. Stymied where he stood, and nervous that his tactics had lost them their quarry, Boyle decided to follow his nose around the back of the house.

The side gate had been left open by Dooley. Boyle advanced up the side passage, glancing through a window into an empty living room

before heading around to the back door. It was open. Dooley, however, was not in sight. Boyle pocketed the photograph and the list and stepped inside, loath to call Dooley's name for fear it alert any felon to his presence, yet nervous of the silence. Cautious as a cat on broken glass he crept through the flat, but each room was deserted. At the apartment door, which let on to the hallway in which he had first seen the figure, he paused. Where had Dooley gone? The man had apparently disappeared from sight.

Then, a groan from beyond the door.

"Dooley?" Boyle ventured. Another groan. He stepped into the hallway. Three more doors presented themselves, all were closed; other flats, presumably. On the coconut mat at the front door lay Dooley's truncheon, dropped there as if its owner had been in the process of making his escape. Boyle swallowed his fear and walked into the body of the hall. The complaint came again, close by. He looked around and up the stairs. There, on the half-landing, lay Dooley. He was barely conscious. A rough attempt had been made to rip his clothes. Large portions of his flabby lower anatomy were exposed.

"What's going on, Dooley?" Boyle asked, moving to the bottom of the stairs. The officer heard his voice and rolled himself over. His bleary eyes, settling on Boyle, opened in terror.

"It's all right," Boyle reassured him. "It's only me."

Too late, Boyle registered that Dooley's gaze wasn't fixed on him at all, but on some sight over his shoulder. As he pivoted on his heel to snatch a glance at Dooley's bugaboo a charging figure slammed into him. Winded and cursing, Boyle was thrown off his feet. He scrabbled about on the floor for several seconds before his attacker seized hold of him by jacket and hair and hauled him to his feet. He recognized at once the wild face that was thrust into his-the receding hairline, the weak mouth, the hunger-but there was much too he had not anticipated. For one, the man was naked as a babe, though scarcely so modestly endowed. For another, he was clearly aroused to fever pitch. If the beady eye at his groin, shining up at Boyle, were not evidence enough, the hands now tearing at his clothes made the assailant's intention perfectly apparent.

"Dooley!" Boyle shrieked as he was thrown across the hallway. "In Christ's name! Dooley!"

His pleas were silenced as he hit the opposite wall. The wild man was at his back in half a heartbeat, smearing Boyle's face against the wallpaper. Birds and flowers, intertwined, filled his eyes. In desperation Boyle fought back, but the man's passion lent him ungovernable strength. With one insolent hand holding the policeman's head, he tore at Boyle's trousers and underwear, leaving his buttocks exposed.

"God…" Boyle begged into the pattern of the wallpaper. "Please God, somebody help me But the prayers were no more fruitful than his struggles. He was pinned against the wall like a butterfly spread on cork, about to be pierced through. He closed his eyes, tears of frustration running down his cheeks. The assailant left off his hold on Boyle's head and pressed his violation home. Boyle refused to cry out. The pain he felt was not the equal of his shame. Better perhaps that Dooley remained comatose; that this humiliation be done and finished with unwitnessed. "Stop," he murmured into the wall, not to his attacker but to his body, urging it not to find pleasure in this outrage. But his nerve endings were treacherous; they caught fire from the assault. Beneath the stabbing agony some unforgivable part of him rose to the occasion.

On the stairs, Dooley hauled himself to his feet. His lumbar region, which had been weak since the car accident the previous Christmas, had given out almost as soon as the wild man had sprung him in the hall. Now, as he descended the stairs, the least motion caused excruciating agonies. Crippled with pain he stumbled to the bottom of the stairs and looked, amazed, across the hallway. Could this be Boyle-he the supercilious, he the rising man, being pummeled like a street kid in need of dope money? The sight transfixed Dooley for several seconds before he unhinged his eyes and swung them down to the truncheon on the mat. He moved cautiously, but the wild man was too occupied with the deflowering to notice him.

Jerome was listening to Boyle's heart. It was a loud, seductive beat, and with every thrust into the man it seemed to get louder. He wanted it: the heat of it, the life of it. His hand moved around to Boyle's chest and dug at the flesh. "Give me your heart," he said. It was like a line from one of the songs.

Boyle screamed into the wall as his attacker mauled his chest. He'd seen photographs of the woman at the laboratories; the open wound of her torso was lightning-clear in his mind's eye. Now the maniac intended the same atrocity. Give me your heart. Panicked to the ledge of his sanity he found new stamina and began to fight afresh, reaching

around and clawing at the man's torso. Nothing-not even the bloody loss of hair from his scalp-broke the rhythm of his thrusts, however. In extremis, Boyle attempted to insinuate one of his hands between his body and the wall and reach between his legs to unman the bastard. As he did so, Dooley attacked, delivering a hail of truncheon blows upon the man's head. The diversion gave Boyle precious leeway. He pressed hard against the wall. The man, his grip on Boyle's chest slicked with blood, lost his hold. Again, Boyle pushed. This time he managed to shrug the man off entirely. The bodies disengaged. Boyle turned, bleeding but in no danger, and watched Dooley follow the man across the hallway, beating at his greasy blond head. He made little at-tempt to protect himself however. His burning eyes (Boyle had never understood the physical accuracy of that image until now) were still on the object of his affections.

"Kill him!" Boyle said quietly as the man grinned-grinned!-through the blows. "Break every bone in his body!" Even if Dooley, hobbled as he was, had been in any fit state to obey the imperative, he had no chance to do so. His berating was interrupted by a voice from down the hallway. A woman had emerged from the flat Boyle had come through. She too had been a victim of this marauder, to judge by her state. But Dooley's entry into the house had clearly distracted her molester before he could do serious damage.

"Arrest him!" she said, pointing at the leering man. "He tried to rape me!"

Dooley closed in to take possession of the prisoner, but Jerome had other intentions. He put his hand in Dooley's face and pushed him back against the front door. The coconut mat slid from under him; he all but fell. By the time he'd regained his balance Jerome was up and away. Boyle made a wretched attempt to stop him, but the tatters of his trousers were wrapped about his lower legs and Jerome, fleet-footed, was soon halfway up the stairs. "Call for help," Boyle ordered Dooley. "And make it quick."

Dooley nodded and opened the front door.

"Is there any way out from upstairs?" Boyle demanded of Mrs. Morrisey. She shook her head. "Then we've got the bastard trapped, haven't we?" he said. "Go on, Dooley!" Dooley hobbled away down the path. "And you," he said to the woman, “fetch something in the way of weaponry. Anything solid." The woman nodded and returned the way she'd come, leaving Boyle slumped beside the open door. A soft breeze cooled the sweat on his face. At the car outside Dooley was calling up

reinforcements.

All too soon, Boyle thought, the cars would be here, and the man upstairs would be hauled away to give his testimony. There would be no opportunity for revenge once he was in custody. The law would take its placid course, and he, the victim, would be only a bystander. If he was ever to salvage the ruins of his manhood, now was the time. If he didn't-if he languished here, his bowels on fire-he would never shrug off the horror he felt at his body's betrayal. He must act now-must beat the grin off his ravisher's face once and for all-or else live in self-disgust until memory failed him.

The choice was no choice at all. Without further debate, he got up from his squatting position and began up the stairs. As he reached the half-landing he realized he hadn't brought a weapon with him. He knew, however, that if he descended again he'd lose all momentum. Prepared, in that moment, to die if necessary, he headed on up. There was only one door open on the top landing. Through it came the sound of a radio. Downstairs, in the safety of the hall, he heard Dooley come in to tell him that the call had been made, only to break off in mid-announcement. Ignoring the distraction, Boyle stepped into the flat.

There was nobody there. It took Boyle a few moments only to check the kitchen, the tiny bathroom and the living room. All were deserted. He returned to the bathroom, the window of which was open, and put his head out. The drop to the grass of the garden below was quite manageable. There was an imprint in the ground of the man's body. He had leaped. And gone.

Boyle cursed his tardiness and hung his head. A trickle of heat ran down the inside of his leg. In the next room, the love songs played on.

For Jerome, there was no forgetfulness, not this time. The encounter with Mrs. Morrisey, which had been interrupted by Dooley, and the episode with Boyle that had followed, had all merely served to fan the fire in him. Now, by the light of those flames, he saw clearly what crimes he had committed. He remembered with horrible clarity the laboratory, the injection, the monkeys, the blood. The acts he recalled, however (and there were many), woke no sense of sinfulness in him. All moral consequence, all shame or remorse, was burned out by the fire that was even now licking his flesh to new enthusiasms.

He took refuge in a quiet cul-de-sac to make himself presentable. The clothes he had managed to snatch before making his escape were

motley but would serve to keep him from attracting unwelcome attention. As he buttoned himself up-his body seeming to strain from its covering as if resentful of being concealed-he tried to control the holocaust that raged between his ears. But the flames wouldn't be dampened. His every fiber seemed alive to the flux and flow of the world around him. The marshaled trees along the road, the wall at his back, the very paving stones beneath his bare feet were catching a spark from him and burning now with their own fire. He grinned to see the conflagration spread. The world, in its every eager particular, grinned back.

Aroused beyond control, he turned to the wall he had been leaning against. The sun had fallen full upon it, and it was warm; the bricks smelled ambrosial. He laid kisses on their gritty faces, his hands exploring every nook and cranny. Murmuring sweet nothings, he unzipped himself, found an accommodating niche, and filled it. His mind was running with liquid pictures: mingled anatomies, female and male in one undistinguishable congress. Above him, even the clouds had caught fire. Enthralled by their burning heads he felt the moment rise in his gristle. Breath was short now. But the ecstasy? Surely that would go on forever.

Without warning a spasm of pain traveled down his spine from cortex to testicles and back again, convulsing him. His hands lost grip of the brick and he finished his agonizing climax on the air as he fell across the pavement. For several seconds he lay where he had collapsed, while the echoes of the initial spasm bounced back and forth along his spine, diminishing with each return. He could taste blood at the back of his throat. He wasn't certain if he'd bitten his lip or tongue, but he thought not. Above his head the birds circled on, rising lazily on a spiral of warm air. He watched the fire in the clouds gutter out.

He got to his feet and looked down at the coinage of semen he'd spent on the pavement. For a fragile instant he caught again a whiff of the vision he'd just had; imagined a marriage of his seed with the paving stone. What sublime children the world might boast, he thought, if he could only mate with brick or tree. He would gladly suffer the agonies of conception if such miracles were possible. But the paving stone was unmoved by his seed's entreaties. The vision, like the fire above him, cooled and hid its glories.

He put his bloodied member away and leaned against the wall, turning the strange events of his recent life over and over. Something fundamental was changing in him, of that he had no doubt. The

rapture that had possessed him (and would, no doubt, possess him again) was like nothing he had hitherto experienced. And whatever they had injected into his system, it showed no signs of being discharged naturally; far from it. He could feel the heat in him still, as he had leaving the laboratories, but this time the roar of its presence was louder than ever.

It was a new kind of life he was living, and the thought, though frightening, exulted him. Not once did it occur to his spinning, eroticized brain that this new kind of life would, in time, demand a new kind of death.

Carnegie had been warned by his superiors that results were expected. He was now passing the verbal beating he'd received to those under him. It was a line of humiliation in which the greater was encouraged to kick the lesser man, and that man, in turn, his lesser. Carnegie had sometimes wondered what the man at the end of the line took his ire out on; his dog presumably.

"This miscreant is still loose, gentlemen, despite his photograph in many of this morning's newspapers and an operating method which is, to say the least, insolent. We will catch him, of course, but let's get the bastard before we have another murder on our hands-”

The phone rang. Boyle's replacement, Migeon, picked it up, while Carnegie concluded his pep talk to the assembled officers.

"I want him in the next twenty-four hours, gentlemen. That's the time scale I've been given, and that's what we've got. Twenty-four hours."

Migeon interrupted. "Sir? It's Johannson. He says he's got something for you. It's urgent."

"Right." The inspector claimed the receiver. "Carnegie.

The voice at the other end was soft to the point of inaudibility. "Carnegie," Johannson said, “we've been right through the laboratory, dug up every piece of information we could find on Dance and Welles's tests-”

"And?"

"We've also analyzed traces of the agent from the hypo they used on the suspect. I think we've found the Boy, Carnegie "What boy?" Carnegie wanted to know. He found Johann son's obfuscation

irritating.

"The Blind Boy Carnegie."

"And?"

For some inexplicable reason Carnegie was certain the man smiled down the phone before replying: "I think perhaps you d better come down and see for yourself. Sometime around noon suit you?"

Johansson could have been one of history's greatest poisoners. He had all the requisite qualifications. A tidy mind (poisoners were, in Carnegie's experience, domestic paragons), a patient nature (poison could take time) and, most importantly, an encyclopedic knowledge of toxicology. Watching him at work, which Carnegie had done on two previous cases, was to see a subtle man at his subtle craft, and the spectacle made Carnegie's blood run cold. Johannson had installed himself in the laboratory on the top floor, where Doctor Dance had been murdered, rather than use police facilities for the investigation, because, as he explained to Carnegie, much of the equipment the Hume organization boasted was simply not available elsewhere. His dominion over the place, accompanied by his two assistants, had, however, transformed the laboratory from the clutter left by the experimenters to a dream of order. Only the monkeys remained a constant. Try as he might Johannson could not control their behavior. "We didn't have much difficulty finding the drug used on your man," Johannson said, “we simply cross-checked traces remaining in the hypodermic with materials found in the room. In fact, they seem to have been manufacturing this stuff, or variations on the theme, for some time. The people here claim they know nothing about it, of course. I'm inclined to believe them. What the good doctors were doing here was, I'm sure, in the nature of a personal experiment." "Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind, and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.

"What sort of experiment?"

Johannson took off his spectacles and set about cleaning them with the tongue of his red tie. "At first, we thought they were developing some kind of hallucinogen," he said. "In some regards the agent used on your man resembles a narcotic. In fact-methods apart-I think they made some very exciting discoveries. Developments which take us into entirely new territory."

"It's not a drug then?"

"Oh, yes, of course it's a drug," Johannson said, replacing the spectacles, “but one created for a very specific purpose. See for yourself."

Johannson led the way across the laboratory to the row of monkeys' cages. Instead of being confined separately, the toxicologist had seen fit to open the interconnecting doors between one cage and the next, allowing the animals free access to gather in groups. The consequence was absolutely plain-the animals were engaged in an elaborate series of sexual acts. Why, Carnegie wondered, did monkeys perpetually perform obscenities? It was the same torrid display whenever he'd taken his offspring, as children, to Regent's Park Zoo; the ape enclosure elicited one embarrassing question upon another. He'd stopped taking the children after a while. He simply found it too mortifying. "Haven't they got anything better to do?" he asked of Johannson, glancing away and then back at a mйnage a' trois that was so intimate the eye could not ascribe member to monkey.

"Believe me," Johannson smirked, “this is mild by comparison with much of the behavior we've seen from them since we gave them a shot of the agent. From that point on they neglected all normal behavior patterns. They bypassed the arousal signals, the courtship rituals. They no longer show any interest in food. They don't sleep. They have become sexual obsessive. All other stimuli are forgotten. Unless the agent is naturally discharged, I suspect they are going to screw themselves to death."

Carnegie looked along the rest of the cages. The same pornographic scenes' were being played out in each one. Mass rape, homosexual liaisons, fervent and ecstatic masturbation.

"It's no wonder the doctors made a secret project of their discovery," Johannson went on. "They were on to something that could have made them a fortune. An aphrodisiac that actually works."

"An aphrodisiac?"

"Most are useless, of course. Rhinoceros horn, live eels in cream sauce: symbolic stuff. They're designed to arouse by association."

Carnegie remembered the hunger in Jerome's eyes. It was echoed here in the monkeys'. Hunger, and the desperation that hunger brings.

"And the ointments too, all useless. Cantharis vesticatora-”What's that?" "You know the stuff as Spanish fly, perhaps? It's a paste made from a beetle. Again, useless. At best these things are irritants. But

this…" He picked up a vial of colorless fluid. "This is damn near genius."

"They don't look too happy with it to me."

"Oh, it's still crude," Johannson said. "I think the researchers were greedy and moved into tests on living subjects a good two or three years before it was wise to do so. The stuff is almost lethal as it stands, no doubt of that. But it could be made to work, given time. You see, they've sidestepped the mechanical problems. This stuff operates directly on the sexual imagination, on the libido. If you arouse the mind, the body follows. That's the trick of it." A rattling of the wire mesh close by drew Carnegie's attention from Johannson's pale features. One of the female monkeys, apparently not satisfied with the attentions of several males, was spread-eagled against her cage, her nimble fingers reaching for Carnegie. Her spouses, not to be left loveless, had taken to sodomy. "Blind Boy?" said Carnegie. "Is that Jerome?"

"It's Cupid, isn't it?" Johannson said: It's Midsummer Night's Dream."

"The bard was never my strongest suit," said Carnegie. He went back to staring at the female monkey "And Jerome?" he said.

"He has the agent in his system. A sizeable dose."

"So he's like this lot!"

"I would presume-his intellectual capacities being greater-that the agent may not be able to work in quite such an unfettered fashion. But, having said that, sex can make monkeys out of the best of us, can't it?" Johannson allowed himself a half-smile at the notion. "All our so-called higher concerns become secondary to the pursuit. For a short time sex makes us obsessive. We can perform, or at least think we can perform, what with hindsight may seem extraordinary feats."

"I don't think there's anything so extraordinary about rape, Carnegie commented, attempting to stem Johannson's rhapsody. But the other man would not be subdued.

"Sex without end, without compromise or apology," he said. "Imagine it. The dream of Casanova."

The world had seen so many Ages: the Age of Enlightenment; of Reformation; of Reason. Now, at last, the Age of Desire. And after this, an end to Ages; an end, perhaps, to everything. For the fires that were

being stoked now were fiercer than the innocent world suspected. They were terrible fires, fires without end, which would illuminate the world in one last, fierce light.

So Welles thought as he lay in his bed. He had been conscious for several hours, but had chosen not to signify such. Whenever a nurse came to his room be would clamp his eyes closed and slow the rhythm of his breath. He knew he could not keep the illusion up for long, but the hours gave him a while to think through his itinerary from here. His first move had to be back to the laboratories. There were papers there he had to shred, tapes to wipe clean. From now on he was determined that every scrap of information about Project Blind Boy exist solely in his head. That way he would have complete control over his masterwork, and nobody could claim it from him.

He had never had much interest in making money from the discovery, although he was well aware of how lucrative a workable aphrodisiac would be; he had never given a fig for material wealth. His initial motivation for the development of the drug-which they had chanced upon quite by accident while testing an agent to aid schizophrenics-had been investigative. But his motives had matured through their months of secret work. He had come to think of himself as the bringer of the millennium. He would not have anyone attempt to snatch that sacred role from him.

So he thought, lying in his bed, waiting for a moment to slip away.

As he walked the streets Jerome would have happily affirmed Welles's vision. Perhaps he, of all men, was most eager to welcome the Age of Desire. He saw its portents everywhere: on advertising billboards and cinema marquees, in shop windows, on television screens-everywhere, the body as merchandise. Where flesh was not being used to market artifacts of steel and stone, those artifacts were taking on its properties. Automobiles passed him by with every voluptuous attribute but breath-their sinuous bodywork gleamed, their interiors invited plushy. The buildings beleaguered him with sexual puns: spires, passageways, shadowed plazas with white-water fountains. Beneath the raptures of the shallow-the thousand trivial distractions he encountered in street and square-he sensed the ripe life of the body informing every particular.

The spectacle kept the fire in him well stoked. It was all that will power could do to keep him from pressing his attentions on every creature that he met eyes with. A few seemed to sense the heat in him and gave him wide berth. Dogs sensed it too. Several followed him,

aroused by his arousal. Flies orbited his head in squadrons. But his growing ease with his condition gave him some rudimentary control over it. He knew that to make a public display of his ardor would bring the law down upon him, and that in turn would hinder his adventures. Soon enough, the fire that he had begun would spread. Then he would emerge from hiding and bathe in it freely. Until then, discretion was best.

He had on occasion bought the company of a young woman in Soho; he went to find her now. The afternoon was stiflingly hot, but he felt no weariness. He had not eaten since the previous evening, but he felt no hunger. Indeed, as he climbed the narrow stairway up to the room on the first floor which Angela had once occupied, he felt as primed as an athlete, glowing with health. The immaculately dressed and wall-eyed pimp who usually occupied a place at the top of the stairs was absent. Jerome simply went to the girl's room and knocked. There was no reply. He rapped again, more urgently. The noise brought an early middle-aged woman to the door at the end of the landing. "What do you want?"

"The woman," he replied simply.

"Angela's gone. And you'd better get out of here too in that state. This isn't a flophouse."

"When will she be back?" he asked, keeping as tight a leash as he could on his appetite.

The woman, who was as tall as Jerome and half as heavy again as his wasted frame, advanced toward him. "The girl won't be back," she said, “so you get the hell out of here, before I call Isaiah."

Jerome looked at the woman. She shared Angela's profession, no doubt, if not her youth or prettiness. He smiled at her. "I can hear your heart," he said.

"I told you-“ Before she could finish the words Jerome moved down the landing toward her. She wasn't intimidated by his approach, merely repulsed.

"If I call Isaiah, you'll be sorry," she informed him. The pace of her heartbeat had risen, he could hear it. "I'm burning," he said.

She frowned. She was clearly losing this battle of wits. "Stay away from me," she told. "I'm warning you." The heartbeat was getting more rapid still. Tile rhythm, buried in her substance, drew him on. From

that source: all life, all heat.

"Give me your heart," he said.

"Isaiah!"

Nobody came running at her shout, however. Jerome gave her no opportunity to cry out a second time. He reached to embrace her, clamping a hand over her mouth. She let fly a volley of blows against him, but the pain only fanned the flames. He was brighter by the moment. His every orifice let onto the furnace in belly and loins and head. Her superior bulk was of no advantage against such fervor. He pushed her against the wall-the beat of her heart loud in his ears-and began to apply kisses to her neck, tearing her dress open to free her breasts.

"Don't shout," he said, trying to sound persuasive. "There's no harm meant."

She shook her head and said, "I won't," against his palm. He took his hand from her mouth and she dragged in several desperate breaths. Where was Isaiah? she thought. Not far, surely. Fearing for her life if she tried to resist this interloper-how his eyes shone!-she gave up any pretense to resistance and let him have his way. Men's supply of passion, she knew from long experience, was easily depleted. Though they might threaten to move earth and heaven too, half an hour later their boasts would be damp sheets and resentment. If worst came to worst, she could tolerate his inane talk of burning; she'd heard far obscener bedroom chat. As to the prong he was even now attempting to press into her, it and its comical like held no surprises for her.

Jerome wanted to touch the heart in her, wanted to see it splash up into his face, to bathe in it. He put his hand to her breast and felt the beat of her under his palm.

"You like that, do you?" she said as he pressed against her bosom. "You're not the first,"

He clawed her skin.

"Gently, sweetheart," she chided him, looking over his shoulder to see if there was any sign of Isaiah. "Be gentle. This is the only body I've got."

He ignored her. His nails drew blood.

"Don't do that," she said.

"Wants to be out," he replied digging deeply, and it suddenly dawned on her that this was no love-game he was playing.

"Stop it," she said, as he began to tear at her. This time she screamed.

Downstairs, and a short way along the street, Isaiah dropped the slice of tarte francaise he'd just bought and ran to the door. It wasn't the first time his sweet tooth had tempted him from his post, but-unless he was quick to undo the damage-it might very well be his last. There were terrible noises from the landing. He raced up the stairs. The scene that met his eyes was in every way worse than that his imagination had conjured. Simone was trapped against the wall beside her door with a man battened upon her. Blood was coming from somewhere between them, he couldn't see where.

Isaiah yelled. Jerome, hands bloody, looked around from his labors as a giant in a Savile Row suit reached for him. It took Jerome vital seconds to uproot himself from the furrow, by which time the man was upon him. Isaiah took hold of him, and dragged him off the woman. She took shelter, sobbing, in her room.

"Sick bastard," Isaiah said, launching a fusillade of punches. Jerome reeled. But he was on fire, and unafraid. In a moment's respite he leaped at his man like an angered baboon. Isaiah, taken unawares, lost balance, and fell back against one of the doors, which opened inward against his weight. He collapsed into a squalid lavatory, his head striking the lip of the toilet bowl as he went down. The impact disoriented him, and he lay on the stained linoleum groaning, legs akimbo. Jerome could hear his blood, eager in his veins; could smell sugar on his breath. It tempted him to stay. But his instinct for self-preservation counseled otherwise; Isaiah was already making an attempt to stand up again. Before he could get to his feet Jerome turned about and made a getaway down the stairs. The dog day met him at the doorstep, and he smiled. The street wanted him more than the woman on the landing, and he was eager to oblige. He started out onto the pavement, his erection still pressing from his trousers. Behind him he heard the giant pounding down the stairs. He took to his heels, laughing. The fire was still uncurbed in him, and it lent speed to his feet. He ran down the street not caring if Sugar Breath was following or not. Pedestrians, unwilling in this dispassionate age to register more than casual interest in the blood-spattered satyr, parted to let him pass. A few pointed, assuming him an actor perhaps. Most took

no notice at all. He made his way through a maze of back streets, aware without needing to look that Isaiah was still on his heels.

Perhaps it was accident that brought him to the street market; perhaps, and more probably, it was that the swelter carried the mingled scent of meat and fruit to his nostrils and he wanted to bathe in it. The narrow thoroughfare was thronged with purchasers, sightseers and stalls heaped with merchandise. He dove into the crowd happily, brushing against buttock and thigh, meeting the plaguing gaze of fellow flesh on every side. Such a day! He and his prick could scarcely believe their luck.

Behind him he heard Isaiah shout. He picked up his pace, heading for the most densely populated area of the market, where he could lose himself in the hot press of people. Each contract was a painful ecstasy. Each climax-and they came one upon the other as he pressed through the crowd-was a dry spasm in his system. His back ached, his balls ached. But what was his body now? Just a plinth for that singular monument, his prick. Head was nothing; mind was nothing. His arms were simply made to bring love close, his legs to carry the demanding rod any place where it might find satisfaction. He pictured himself as a walking erection, the world gaping on every side. Flesh, brick, steel, he didn't care-he would ravish it all.

Suddenly, without his seeking it, the crowd parted, and he found himself off the main thoroughfare and in a narrow street. Sunlight poured between the buildings, its zeal magnified. He was about to turn back to join the crowd again when he caught a scent and sight that drew him on. A short way down the heat-drenched street three shirtless young men were standing amid piles of fruit crates, each containing dozens of baskets of strawberries. There had been a glut of the fruit that year, and in the relentless heat much of it had begun to soften and rot. The trio of workers was going through the baskets, sorting bad fruit from good, and throwing the spoiled strawberries into the gutter. The smell in the narrow space was overpowering, a sweetness of such strength it would have sickened any interloper other than Jerome, whose senses had lost all capacity for revulsion or rejection. The world was the world was the world; he would take it, as in marriage, for better or worse. He stood watching the spectacle entranced: the sweating fruit sorters bright in the fall of sun, hands, arms and torsos spattered with scarlet juice; the air mazed with every nectar-seeking insect; the discarded fruit heaped in the gutter in seeping mounds. Engaged in their sticky labors, the sorters didn't even see him at first. Then one of the three looked up and took in the extraordinary creature watching them. The grin on his face died as he

met Jerome's eyes.

"What the hell?"

Now the other two looked up from their work.

"Sweet," said Jerome. He could hear their hearts tremble.

"Look at him," said the youngest of the three, pointing at Jerome's groin. "Fucking exposing himself." They stood still in the sunlight, he and they, while the wasps whirled around the fruit and, in the narrow slice of blue summer sky between the roofs, birds passed over. Jerome wanted the moment to go on forever; his too-naked head tasted Eden here.

And then, the dream broke. He felt a shadow on his back. One of the sorters dropped the basket he was sorting through; the decayed fruit broke open on the gravel. Jerome frowned and half-turned. Isaiah had found the street. His weapon was steel and shone. It crossed the space between him and Jerome in one short second. Jerome felt an ache in his side as the knife slid into him.

"Christ," the young man said and began to run. His two brothers, unwilling to be witnesses at the scene of a wounding, hesitated only moments longer before following.

The pain made Jerome cry out, but nobody in the noisy market heard him. Isaiah withdrew the blade; heat came with it. He made to stab again but Jerome was too fast for the spoiler. He moved out of range and staggered across the street. The would-be assassin, fearful that Jerome's cries would draw too much attention, moved quickly in pursuit to finish the lob. But the tarmac was slick with rotted fruit, and his fine suede shoes had less grip than Jerome's bare feet. The gap between them widened by a pace.

"No you don't," Isaiah said, determined not to let his humiliator escape. He pushed over a tower of fruit crates baskets toppled and strewed their contents across Jerome's path. Jerome hesitated, to take in the bouquet of bruised fruit. The indulgence almost killed him. Isaiah closed in, ready to take the man. Jerome, his system taxed to near eruption by the stimulus of pain, watched the blade come close to opening up his belly. His mind conjured the wound: the abdomen slit-the heat spilling out to join the blood of the strawberries in the gutter. The thought was so tempting. He almost wanted it.

Isaiah had killed before, twice. He knew the wordless vocabulary of

the act, and he could see the invitation in his victim's eyes. Happy to oblige, he came to meet it, knife at the ready. At the last possible moment Jerome recanted, and instead of presenting himself for slitting, threw a blow at the giant. Isaiah ducked to avoid it and his feet slid in the mush. The knife fled from his hand and fell among the debris of baskets and fruit. Jerome turned away as the hunter-the advantage lost-stooped to locate the knife. But his prey was gone before his ham-fisted grip had found it; lost again in the crowd-filled streets. He had no opportunity to pocket the knife before the uniform stepped out of the crowd and joined him in the hot passageway.

"What's the story?" the policeman demanded, looking down at the knife. Isaiah followed his gaze. The bloodied blade was black with flies.

In his office Inspector Carnegie sipped at his hot chocolate, his third in the past hour, and watched the processes of dusk. He had always wanted to be a detective, right from his earliest rememberings. And, in those rememberings, this had always been a charged and magical hour. Night descending on the city; myriad evils putting on their glad rags and coming out to play. A time for vigilance, for a new moral stringency.

But as a child he had failed to imagine the fatigue that twilight invariably brought. He was tired to his bones, and if he snatched any sleep in the next few hours he knew it would be here, in his chair, with his feet up on the desk amid a clutter of plastic cups.

The phone rang. It was Johannson.

"Still at work?" he said, impressed by Johannson's dedication to the job. It was well after nine. Perhaps Johannson didn't have a home worth calling such to go back to either.

"I heard our man had a busy day," Johannson said.

"That's right. A prostitute in Soho, then got himself stabbed."

"He got through the cordon, I gather?"

"These things happen," Carnegie replied, too tired to be testy. "What can I do for you?"

"I just thought you'd want to know: the monkeys have started to die."

The words stirred Carnegie from his fatigue-stupor. "How many?" he asked.

"Three from fourteen so far. But the rest will be dead by dawn, I'd guess."

"What's killing them? Exhaustion?" Carnegie recalled the desperate saturnalia he'd seen in the cages. What animal human or otherwise-could keep up such revelry without cracking up?

"It's not physical," Johannson said. "Or at least not in the way you're implying. We'll have to wait for the dissection results before we get any detailed explanations-"

"Your best guess?"

"For what it's worth…" Johannson said,"… which is quite a lot: I think they're going bang."

"What?"

"Cerebral overload of some kind. Their brains are simply giving out. The agent doesn't disperse you see. It feeds on itself. The more fevered they get, the more of the drug is produced; the more of the drug there is, the more fevered they get. It's a vicious circle. Hotter and hotter, wilder and wilder. Eventually the system can't take it, and suddenly I'm up to my armpits in dead monkeys." The smile came back into the voice again, cold and wry. "Not that the others let that spoil their fun. Necrophilia's quite the fashion down here."

Carnegie peered at his cooling hot chocolate. It had acquired a thin skin which puckered as he touched the cup. "So it's just a matter of time?" he said.

"Before our man goes for bust? Yes, I'd think so.

"All right. Thank you for the update. Keep me posted."

"You want to come down here and view the remains?"

"Monkey corpses I can do without, thank you."

Johannson laughed. Carnegie put down the receiver. When he turned back to the window, night had well and truly fallen.

In the laboratory Johannson crossed to the light switch by the door. In the time he'd been calling Carnegie the last of the daylight had fled.

He saw the blow that felled him coming a mere heartbeat before it landed; it caught him across the side of his neck. One of his vertebrae snapped and his legs buckled. He collapsed without reaching the light switch. But by the time he hit the ground the distinction between day and night was academic. Welles didn't bother to check whether his blow had been lethal or not; time was at a premium. He stepped over the body and headed across to the bench where Johannson had been working. There, lying in a circle of lamplight as if for the final act of a simian tragedy, lay a dead monkey. It had clearly perished in a frenzy. Its face was knitted up; mouth wide and spittle-stained; eyes fixed in a final Took of alarm. Its fur had been pulled out in tufts in the throes of its copulations. Its body, wasted with exertion, was a mass of contusions. It took Welles half a minute of study to recognize the implications of the corpse, and of the other two he now saw lying on a nearby bench. "Love kills," he murmured to himself philosophically and began his systematic destruction of Blind Boy.

I'm dying, Jerome thought. I'm dying of terminal joy. The thought amused him. It was the only thought in his head which made much sense. Since his encounter with Isaiah and the escape from the police that had followed, he could remember little with any coherence. The hours of hiding and nursing his wounds-of feeling the heat grow again, and of discharging it-had long since merged into one midsummer dream, from which, he knew with pleasurable certainty, only death would wake him. The blaze was devouring him utterly, from the entrails out. If he were to be eviscerated now, what would the witnesses find? Only embers and ashes.

Yet still his one-eyed friend demanded more. Still, as he wove his way back to the laboratories-where else for a made man to go when the stitches slipped but back to the first heat?-still the grids gaped at him seductively, and every brick wall offered up a hundred gritty invitations.

The night was balmy: a night for love songs and romance. In the questionable privacy of a parking lot a few blocks from his destination he saw two people having sex in the back of a car, the doors open to accommodate limbs and draft. Jerome paused to watch the ritual, enthralled as ever by the tangle of bodies and the sound-so loud it was like thunder-of twin hearts beating to one escalating rhythm. Watching, his rod grew eager.

The female saw him first and alerted her partner to the wreck of a human being who was watching them with such childish delight. The male looked around from his gropings to stare. Do I burn, Jerome

wondered? Does my hair flame? At the last, does the illusion gain substance? To judge by the look on their faces, the answer was surely no. They were not in awe of him, merely angered and revolted.

"I'm on fire," he told them.

The male got to his feet and spat at Jerome. He almost expected the spittle to turn to steam as it approached him but instead it landed on his face and upper chest as a cooling shower.

"Go to hell," the woman said. "Leave us alone."

Jerome shook his head. The male warned him that another step would oblige him to break Jerome's head. It disturbed our man not a jot; no words, no blows, could silence the imperative of the rod.

Their hearts, he realized, as he moved toward them, no longer beat in tandem.

Carnegie consulted the map, five years out of date now, on his office wall to pinpoint the location of the attack that had just been reported. Neither of the victims had come to serious harm, apparently. The arrival of a carload of revelers had dissuaded Jerome (it was unquestionably Jerome) from lingering. Now the area was being flooded with officers, half a dozen of them armed. In a matter of minutes every street in the vicinity of the attack would be cordoned off. Unlike Soho, which had been crowded, the area would furnish the fugitive with few hiding places. Carnegie pinpointed the location of the attack and realized that it was within a few blocks of the laboratories. No accident, surely. The man was heading back to the scene of his crime. Wounded, and undoubtedly on the verge of collapse-the lovers had described a man who looked more dead than alive-Jerome would probably be picked up before he reached home. But there was always the risk of his slipping through the net and getting to the laboratories. Johannson was working there, alone. The guard on the building was, in these straitened times, necessarily small. Carnegie picked up the phone and dialed through to the Johannson. The phone rang at the other end but nobody picked it up. The man's gone home, Carnegie thought, happy to be relieved of his concern. It's ten-fifty at night and he's earned his rest. Just as he was about to put the receiver down, however, it was picked up at the other end. "Johannson?"

Nobody replied.

"Johannson? This is Carnegie." And still, no reply. "Answer me,

damn it. Who is this?"

In the laboratories the receiver was forsaken. It was not replaced on the cradle hut left to lie on the bench. Down the buzzing line, Carnegie could clearly hear the monkeys, their voices shrill.

"Johannson?" Carnegie demanded. "Are you there? Johannson?"

But the apes screamed on.

Welles had built two bonfires of the Blind Boy material in the sinks and then set them alight. They flared up enthusiastically. Smoke, heat and ashes filled the large room, thickening the air. When the fires were fairly raging he threw all the tapes he could lay hands upon into the conflagration, and added all of Johannson's notes for good measure. Several of the tapes had already gone from the files, he noted. But all they could show any thief was some teasing scenes of transformation. The heart of the secret remained his. With the procedures and formulae now destroyed, it only remained to wash the small amounts of remaining agent down the drain and kill and incinerate the animals.

He prepared a series of lethal hypodermics, going about the business with uncharacteristic orderliness. This systematic destruction gratified him. He felt no regret at the way things had turned out. From that first moment of panic, when he'd helplessly watched the Blind Boy serum work its awesome effects upon Jerome, to this final elimination of all that had gone before had been, he now saw, one steady process of wiping clean. With these fires he brought an end to the pretense of scientific inquiry. After this he was indisputably the Apostle of Desire, its John in the Wilderness. The thought blinded him to any other. Careless of the monkeys' scratching he hauled them one by one from their cages to deliver the killing dose. He had dispatched three, and was opening the cage of the fourth, when a figure appeared in the doorway of the laboratory. Through the smoky air it was impossible to see who. The surviving monkeys seemed to recognize him, however. They left off their couplings and set up a din of welcome. Welles stood still and waited for the newcomer to make his move.

"I'm dying," said Jerome.

Welles had not expected this. Of all the people he had anticipated here, Jerome was the last.

"Did you hear me?" the man wanted to know.

Welles nodded. "We're all dying, Jerome. Life is a slow disease, no more nor less. But such a light, eh? in the going."

"You knew this would happen," Jerome said. "You knew the fire would eat me away.

"No," came the sober reply. "No, I didn't. Really."

Jerome walked out of the door frame and into the murky light. He was a wasted shambles, a patchwork man, blood on his body, fire in his eyes. But Welles knew better than to trust the apparent vulnerability of this scarecrow. The agent in his system had made him capable of superhuman acts. He had seen Dance torn open with a few nonchalant strokes. Tact was required. Though clearly close to death, Jerome was still formidable.

"I didn't intend this, Jerome," Welles said, attempting to tame the tremor in his voice. "I wish, in a way, I could claim that I had. But I wasn't that farsighted. It's taken me time and pain to see the future plainly." The burning man watched him, gaze intent.

"Such fires, Jerome, waiting to be lit."

"I know…" Jerome replied. "Believe me… I know'

"You and I, we are the end of the world."

The wretched monster pondered this for a while, and then nodded slowly. Welles softly exhaled a sigh of relief. The deathbed diplomacy was working. But he had little time to waste with talk. If Jerome was here, could the authorities be far behind?

"I have urgent work to do, my friend," he said calmly. "Would you think me uncivil if I continued with it?" Without waiting for a reply he unlatched another cage and hauled the condemned monkey out, expertly turning its body around to facilitate the injection. The animal convulsed in his arms for a few moments, then died. Welles disengaged its wizened fingers from his shirt and tossed the corpse and the discharged hypodermic on to the bench, turning with an executioner's economy to claim his next victim.

"Why?" Jerome asked, staring at the animal's open eyes.

"Act of mercy," Welles replied, picking up another primed hypodermic. "You can see how they're suffering." He reached to unlatch the next cage.

"Don't," Jerome said.

"No time for sentiment," Welles replied. "I beg you, an end to that."

Sentiment, Jerome thought, muddily remembering the songs on the radio that had first rewoken the fire in him. Didn't Welles understand that the processes of heart and head and groin were indivisible? That sentiment, however trite, might lead to undiscovered regions? He wanted to tell the doctor that, to explain all that he had seen and all that he had loved in these desperate hours. But somewhere between mind and tongue the explanations absconded. All he could say, to state the empathy he felt for all the suffering world, was: "Don't," as Welles unlocked the next cage. The doctor ignored him and reached into the wire-mesh cell. It contained three animals. He took hold of the nearest and drew it, protesting, from its companions' embraces. Without doubt it knew what fate awaited it; a flurry of screeches signaled its terror.

Jerome couldn't stomach this casual disposal. He moved, the wound in his side a torment, to prevent the killing. Welles, distracted by Jerome's advance, lost hold of his wriggling charge. The monkey scampered away across the bench tops. As he went to recapture it the prisoners in the cage behind him took their chance and slipped out. "Damn you," Welles yelled at Jerome, “don't you see we've no time? Don't you understand?"

Jerome understood everything, and yet nothing. The fever he and the animals shared he understood; its purpose, to transform the world, he understood too. But why it should end like this-that joy, that vision-why it should all come down to a sordid room filled with smoke and pain, to frailty, to despair? That he did not comprehend. Nor, he now realized, did Welles, who had been the architect of these contradictions.

As the doctor made a snatch for one of the escaping monkeys, Jerome crossed swiftly to the remaining cages and unlatched them all. The animals leaped to their freedom. Welles had succeeded with his recapture, however, and had the protesting monkey in his grip, about to deliver the panacea. Jerome made toward him.

"Let it be," he yelled.

Welles pressed the hypodermic into the monkey's body, but before he could depress the plunger Jerome had pulled at his wrist. The hypodermic spat its poison into the air and then fell to the ground.

The monkey, wresting itself free, followed.

Jerome pulled Welles close. "I told you to let it be," he said.

Welles's response was to drive his fist into Jerome's wounded flank. Tears of pain spurted from his eyes, but he didn't release the doctor. The stimulus, unpleasant as it was, could not dissuade him from holding that beating heart close. He wished, embracing Welles like a prodigal, that he could ignite himself, that the dream of burning flesh he had endured would now become a reality, consuming maker and made in one cleansing flame. But his flesh was only flesh; his bone, bone. What miracles he had seen had been a private revelation, and now there was no time to communicate their glories or their horrors. What he had seen would die with him, to be rediscovered (perhaps) by some future self, only to be forgotten and discovered again. Like the story of love the radio had told; the same joy lost and found, found and lost. He stared at Welles with new comprehension dawning, hearing still the terrified beat of the man's heart. The doctor was wrong. If he left the man to live, he would come to know his error. They were not presagers of the millennium. They had both been dreaming.

"Don't kill me," Welles pleaded. "I don't want to die."

More fool you, Jerome thought, and let the man go.

Welles's bafflement was plain. He couldn't believe that his appeal for life had been answered. Anticipating a blow with every step he took he backed away from Jerome, who simply turned his back on the doctor and walked away. From downstairs there came a shout, and then many shouts. Police, Welles guessed. They had presumably found the body of the officer who'd been on guard at the door. In moments only they would be coming up the stairs. There was no time now for finishing the tasks he'd come here to perform. He had to be away before they arrived. On the floor below Carnegie watched the armed officers disappear up the stairs. There was a faint smell of burning in the air. He feared the worst.

I am the man who comes after the act, he thought to himself. I am perpetually upon the scene when the best of the action is over. Used as he was to waiting, patient as a loyal dog, this time he could not hold his anxieties in check while the others went ahead. Disregarding the voices advising him to wait, be began up the stairs. The laboratory on the top floor was empty but for the monkeys and Johannson's corpse. The toxicologist lay on his face where he had fallen, neck

broken. The emergency exit, which let on to the fire escape, was open; smoky air was being sucked out through it. As Carnegie stepped away from Johannson's body officers were already on the fire escape calling to their colleagues below to seek out the fugitive.

"Sir?"

Carnegie looked across at the mustachioed individual who had approached him.

"What is it?"

The officer pointed to the other end of the laboratory, to the test chamber. There was somebody at the window. Carnegie recognized the features, even though they were much changed. It was Jerome. At first he thought the man was watching him, but a short perusal scotched that idea. Jerome was staring, tears on his face, at his own reflection in the smeared glass. Even as Carnegie watched, the face retreated with the gloom of the chamber. Other officers had noticed the man too. They were moving down the length of the laboratory, taking up positions behind the benches where they had a good line on the door, weapons at the ready. Carnegie had been present in such situations before; they had their own, terrible momentum. Unless he intervened, there would be blood. "No," he said, “hold your fire."

He pressed the protesting officer aside and began to walk down the laboratory, making no attempt to conceal his advance. He walked past sinks in which the remains of Blind Boy guttered, past the bench under which, a short age ago, they'd found the dead Dance. A monkey, its head bowed, dragged itself across his path, apparently deaf to his proximity. He let it find a hole to die in, then moved on to the chamber door. It was ajar. He reached for the handle. Behind him the laboratory had fallen completely silent; all eyes were on him. He pulled the door open. Fingers tightened on triggers. There was no attack however. Carnegie stepped inside.

Jerome was standing against the opposite wall. If he saw Carnegie enter, or heard him, he made no sign of it. A dead monkey lay at his feet, one hand still grasping the hem of his trousers. Another whimpered in the corner, holding its head in its hands.

"Jerome?"

Was it Carnegie's imagination, or could he smell strawberries?

Jerome blinked.

"You're under arrest," Carnegie said. Hendrix would appreciate the irony of that, he thought. Tile man moved his bloody hand from the stab wound in his side to the front of his trousers and began to stroke himself. "Too late," Jerome said. He could feel the last fire rising in him. Even if this intruder chose to cross the chamber and arrest him now, the intervening seconds would deny him his capture. Death was here. And what was it, now that he saw it clearly? Just another seduction, another sweet darkness to be filled up, and pleasured and made fertile. A spasm began in his perineum, and lightning traveled in two directions from the spot, up his rod and up his spine. A laugh began in his throat.

In the corner of the chamber the monkey, hearing Jerome's humor, began to whimper again. The sound momentarily claimed Carnegie's attention, and when his gaze flitted back to Jerome the short-sighted eyes had closed, the hand had dropped, and he was dead, standing against the wall. For a short time the body defied gravity. Then, gracefully the legs buckled and Jerome fell forward. He was, Carnegie saw, a sack of bones, no more. It was a wonder the man had lived so long.

Cautiously, he crossed to the body and put his finger to the man's neck. There was no pulse. The remnants of Jerome's last laugh remained on his face, however, refusing to decay.

"Tell me…" Carnegie whispered to the man, sensing that despite his preemption he had missed the moment; that once again he was, and perhaps would always be, merely a witness of consequences. "Tell me. What was the joke?"

But the blind boy, as is the wont of his clan, wasn't telling.

XXII: THE FORBIDDEN

Like a flawless tragedy, the elegance of which structure is lost upon those suffering in it, the perfect geometry of the Spector Street Estate was only visible from the air. Walking in its drear canyons, passing through its grimy corridors from one grey concrete rectangle to the next, there was little to seduce the eye or stimulate the imagination. What few saplings had been planted in the quadrangles had long since been mutilated or uprooted; the grass, though tall, resolutely refused a healthy green.

No doubt the estate and its two companion developments had once been an architect's dream. No doubt the city planners had wept with pleasure at a design which housed three and thirty-six persons per hectare, and still boasted space for a children's playground. Doubtless fortunes and reputations had been built upon Spector Street, and at its opening fine words had been spoken of its being a yardstick by which all future developments would be measured. But the planners – tears wept, words spoken – had left the estate to its own devices; the architects occupied restored Georgian houses at the other end of the city, and probably never set foot here.

They would not have been shamed by the deterioration of the estate even if they had. Their brain-child (they would doubtless argue) was as brilliant as ever: its geometries as precise, its ratios as calculated; it was people who had spoiled Spector Street. Nor would they have been wrong in such an accusation. Helen had seldom seen an inner city environment so comprehensively vandalized. Lamps bad been shattered and back-yard fences overthrown; cars whose wheels and engines had been removed and chassis then burned, blocked garage facilities. In one courtyard three or four ground-floor maisonettes had been entirely gutted by fire, their windows and doors boarded up with planks and corrugated iron.

More startling still was the graffiti. That was what she had come here to see, encouraged by Archie's talk of the place, and she was not disappointed. It was difficult to believe, staring at the multiple layers of designs, names, obscenities, and dogmas that were scrawled and sprayed on every available brick, that Spector Street was barely three and a half years old. The walls, so recently virgin, were now so profoundly defaced that the Council Cleaning Department could never hope to return them to their former condition. A layer of whitewash to cancel this visual cacophony would only offer the scribes a fresh and

yet more tempting surface on which to make their mark. Helen was in seventh heaven. Every corner she turned offered some fresh material for her thesis: "Graffiti: the semiotics of urban despair'. It was a subject which married her two favourite disciplines – sociology and aesthetics and as she wandered around the estate she began to wonder if there wasn't a book, in addition to her thesis, in the subject. She walked from courtyard to courtyard, copying down a large number of the more interesting scrawlings, and noting their location. Then she went back to the car to collect her camera and tripod and returned to the most fertile of the areas, to make a thorough visual record of the walls.

It was a chilly business. She was not an expert photographer, and the late October sky was in full flight, shifting the light on the bricks from one moment to the next. As she adjusted and re-adjusted the exposure to compensate for the light changes, her fingers steadily became clumsier, her temper correspondingly thinner. But she struggled on, the idle curiosity of passers-by notwithstanding. There were so many designs to document. She reminded herself that her present discomfort would be amply repaid when she showed the slides to Trevor, whose doubt of the project's validity had been perfectly apparent from the beginning.

"The writing on the wall?" he'd said, half smiling in that irritating fashion of his, "It's been done a hundred times." This was true, of course; and yet not. There certainly were learned works on graffiti, chock full of sociological jargon: cultural disenfranchisement; urban alienation. But she flattered herself that she might find something amongst this litter of scrawlings that previous analysts had not: some unifying convention perhaps, that she could use as the lynch-pin of her thesis. Only a vigorous cataloguing and cross-referencing of the phrases and images before her would reveal such a correspondence; hence the importance of this photographic study. So many hands had worked here; so many minds left their mark, however casually: if she could find some pattern, some predominant motive, or motif, the thesis would be guaranteed some serious attention, and so, in turn, would she. "What are you doing?" a voice from behind her asked.

She turned from her calculations to see a young woman with a pushchair on the pavement behind her. She looked weary, Helen thought, and pinched by the cold. The child in the pushchair was mewling, his grimy fingers clutching an orange lollipop and the wrapping from a chocolate bar. The bulk of the chocolate, and the remains of previous jujubes, was displayed down the front of his coat.

Helen offered a thin smile to the woman; she looked in need of it.

"I'm photographing the walls," she said in answer to the initial enquiry, though surely this was perfectly apparent. The woman – she could barely be twenty – Helen judged, said: "You mean the filth?"

"The writing and the pictures," Helen said. Then: "Yes. The filth."

"You from the Council?"

"No, the University."

"It's bloody disgusting," the woman said. "The way they do that. It's not just kids, either."

"No?"

"Grown men. Grown men, too. They don't give a damn. Do it in broad daylight. You see 'em… broad daylight." She glanced down at the child, who was sharpening his lollipop on the ground. "Kerry!" she snapped, but the boy took no notice. "Are they going to wipe it off?" she asked Helen.

"I don't know," Helen said, and reiterated: "I'm from the University."

"Oh," the woman replied, as if this was new information, “so you're nothing to do with the Council?" "No."

"Some of it's obscene, isn't it?; really dirty. Makes me embarrassed to see some of the things they draw." Helen nodded, casting an eye at the boy in the pushchair. Kerry had decided to put his sweet in his ear for safekeeping.

"Don't do that!" his mother told him, and leaned over to slap the child's hand. The blow, which was negligible, began the child bawling. Helen took the opportunity to return to her camera. But the woman still desired to talk. "It's not just on the outside, neither," she commented.

"I beg your pardon?" Helen said.

"They break into the flats when they go empty. The Council tried to board them up, but it does no good. They break in anyway. Use them as toilets, and write more filth on the walls. They light fires too. Then nobody can move back in."

The description piqued Helen's curiosity. Would the graffiti on the

inside walls be substantially different from the public displays? It was certainly worth an investigation.

"Are there any places you know of around here like that?"

"Empty flats, you mean?"

"With graffiti."

"Just by us, there's one or two," the woman volunteered. "I'm in Butts' Court."

"Maybe you could show me?" Helen asked.

The woman shrugged.

"By the way, my name's Helen Buchanan."

"Anne-Marie," the mother replied.

"I'd be very grateful if you could point me to one of those empty flats."

Anne-Marie was baffled by Helen's enthusiasm, and made no attempt to disguise it, but she shrugged again and said: "There's nothing much to see. Only more of the same stuff."

Helen gathered up her equipment and they walked side by side through the intersecting corridors between one square and the next. Though the estate was low-rise, each court only five storeys high, the effect of each quadrangle was horribly claustrophobic. The walkways and staircases were a thief's dream, rife with blind 'corners and ill-lit tunnels. The rubbish-dumping facilities – chutes from the upper floors down which bags of refuse could be pitched – had long since been sealed up, thanks to their efficiency as fire-traps. Now plastic bags of refuse were piled high in the corridors, many torn open by roaming dogs, their contents strewn across the ground. The smell, even in the cold weather, was unpleasant. In high summer it must have been overpowering.

"I'm over the other side," Anne-Marie said, pointing across the quadrangle. "The one with the yellow door." She then pointed along the opposite side of the court. "Five or six maisonettes from the far end," she said. "There's two of them been emptied out. Few weeks now. One of the family's moved into Ruskin Court; the other did a bunk in the middle of the night."

With that, she turned her back on Helen and wheeled Kerry, who had taken to trailing spittle from the side of his pushchair, around the side of the square.

"Thank you," Helen called after her. Anne-Marie glanced over her shoulder briefly, but did not reply. Appetite whetted, Helen made her way along the row of ground floor maisonettes, many of which, though inhabited, showed little sign of being so. Their curtains were closely drawn; there were no m ilk-bottles on the doorsteps, nor children's toys left where they had been played with. Nothing, in fact, of life here. There was more graffiti however, sprayed, shockingly, on the doors of occupied houses. She granted the scrawlings only a casual perusal, in part because she feared one of the doors opening as she examined a choice obscenity sprayed upon it, but more because she was eager to see what revelations the empty flats ahead might offer.

The malign scent of urine, both fresh and stale, welcomed her at the threshold of number 14, and beneath that the smell of burnt paint and plastic. She hesitated for fully ten seconds, wondering if stepping into the maisonette was a wise move. The territory of the estate behind her was indisputably foreign, sealed off m its own misery, but the rooms in front of her were more intimidating still: a dark maze which her eyes could barely penetrate. But when her courage faltered she thought of Trevor, and how badly she wanted to silence his condescension. So thinking, she advanced into the place, deliberately kicking a piece of charred timber aside as she did so, in the hope that she would alert any tenant into showing himself.

There was no sound of occupancy however. Gaining confidence, she began to explore the front room of the maisonette which had been – to judge by the remains of a disemboweled sofa in one corner and the sodden carpet underfoot – a living-room. The pale-green walls were, as Anne-Marie had promised, extensively defaced, both by minor scribblers – content to work in pen, or even more crudely in sofa charcoal – and by those with aspirations to public works, who had sprayed the walls in half a dozen colours.

Some of the comments were of interest, though many she bad already seen on the walls outside. Familiar names and couplings repeated themselves. Though she bad never set eyes on these individuals she knew how badly Fabian J. (A.OK!) wanted to deflower Michelle; and that Michelle, in her turn, had the hots for somebody called Mr. Sheen. Here, as elsewhere, a man called White Rat boasted of his endowment, and the return of the Syllabub Brothers was promised in red paint. One or two of the pictures accompanying, or at

least adjacent to, these phrases were of particular interest. An almost emblematic simplicity informed them. Beside the word Christos was a stick man with his hair radiating from his head like spines, and other heads impaled on each spine. Close by was an image of intercourse so brutally reduced that at first Helen took it to illustrate a knife plunging into a sightless eye. But fascinating as the images were, the room was too gloomy for her film and she had neglected to bring a flash. If she wanted a reliable record of these discoveries she would have to come again, and for now be content with a simple exploration of the premises.

The maisonette wasn't that large, but the windows had been boarded up throughout, and as she moved further from the front door the dubious light petered out altogether. The smell of urine, which had been strong at the door, intensified too, until by the time she reached the back of the living-room and stepped along a short corridor into another room beyond, it was cloying as incense. This room, being furthest from the front door, was also the darkest, and she had to wait a few moments in the cluttered gloom to allow her eyes to become useful. This, she guessed, had been the bedroom. What little furniture the residents had left behind them had been smashed to smithereens. Only the mattress had been left relatively untouched, dumped in the corner of the room amongst a wretched litter of blankets, newspapers, and pieces of crockery.

Outside, the sun found its way between the clouds, and two or three shafts of sunlight slipped between the boards nailed across the bedroom window and pierced the room like annunciations, scoring the opposite wall with bright lines. Here, the graffitists had been busy once more: the usual clamour of love-letters and threats. She scanned the wall quickly, and as she did so her eye was led by the beams of light across the room to the wall which contained the door she had stepped through.

Here, the artists had also been at work, but had produced an image the like of which she had not seen anywhere else. Using the door, which was centrally placed in the wall, as a mouth, the artists had sprayed a single, vast head on to the stripped plaster. The painting was more adroit than most she had seen, rife with detail that lent the image an unsettling veracity. The cheekbones jutting through skin the colour of buttermilk; the teeth – sharpened to irregular points – all converging on the door. The sitter's eyes were, owing to the room's low ceiling, set mere inches above the upper lip, but this physical adjustment only lent force to the image, giving the impression that he had thrown his head back. Knotted strands of his hair snaked from his

scalp across the ceiling.

Was it a portrait? There was something naggingly specific in the details of the brows and the lines around the wide mouth; in the careful picturing of those vicious teeth. A nightmare certainly: a facsimile, perhaps, of something from a heroin fugue. Whatever its origins, it was potent. Even the illusion of door-as-mouth worked. The short passageway between living-room and bedroom offered a passable throat, with a tattered lamp in lieu of tonsils. Beyond the gullet, the day burned white in the nightmare's belly. The whole effect brought to mind a ghost train painting. The same heroic deformity, the same unashamed intention to scare. And it worked; she stood in the bedroom almost stupified by the picture, its red-rimmed eyes fixing her mercilessly. Tomorrow, she determined, she would come here again, this time with high-speed film and a flash to illuminate the masterwork. As she prepared to leave the sun went in, and the bands of light faded. She glanced over her shoulder at the boarded windows, and saw for the first time that one four-word slogan had been sprayed on the wall beneath them. "Sweets to the sweet' it read. She was familiar with the quote, but not with its source. Was it a profession of love? If so, it was an odd location for such an avowal. Despite the mattress in the corner, and the relative privacy of this room, she could not imagine the intended reader of such words ever stepping in here to receive her bouquet. No adolescent lovers, however heated, would lie down here to play at mothers and fathers; not under the gaze of the terror on the wall. She crossed to examine the writing. The paint looked to be the same shade of pink as had been used to colour the gums of the screaming man; perhaps the same hand?

Behind her, a noise. She turned so quickly she almost tripped over the blanket-strewn mattress. "Who -?"

At the other end of the gullet, in the living-room, was a scab-kneed boy of six or seven. He stared at Helen, eyes glittering in the half-light, as if waiting for a cue.

"Yes?" she said.

"Anne-Marie says do you want a cup of tea?" he declared without pause or intonation.

Her conversation with the woman seemed hours past. She was grateful for the invitation however. The damp in the maisonette had chilled her.

"Yes…" she said to the boy. "Yes please."

The child didn't move, but simply stared on at her.

"Are you going to lead the way?" she asked him.

"If you want," he replied, unable to raise a trace of enthusiasm.

"I'd like that."

"You taking photographs?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am. But not in here." "Why not?"

"It's too dark," she told him.

"Don't it work in the dark?" he wanted to know.

"No."

The boy nodded at this, as if the information somehow fitted well into his scheme of things, and about turned without another word, clearly expecting Helen to follow.

If she had been taciturn in the street, Anne-Marie was anything but in the privacy of her own kitchen. Gone was the guarded curiosity, to be replaced by a stream of lively chatter and a constant scurrying between half a dozen minor domestic tasks, like a juggler keeping several plates spinning simultaneously. Helen watched this balancing act with some admiration; her own domestic skills were negligible. At last, the meandering conversation turned back to the subject that had brought Helen here.

"Them photographs," Anne-Marie said, “why'd you want to take them?"

"I'm writing about graffiti. The photos will illustrate my thesis."

"It's not very pretty."

"No, you're right, it isn't. But I find it interesting."

Anne-Marie shook her head. "I hate the whole estate," she said. "It's not safe here. People getting robbed on their own doorsteps. Kids setting fire to the rubbish day in, day out. Last summer we had the fire brigade here two, three times a day 'til they sealed them chutes off. Now people just dump the bags in the passageways, and that

attracts rats."

"Do you live here alone?"

"Yes," she said, “since Davey walked out."

"That your husband?"

"He was Kerry's father, but we weren't never married. We lived together two years, you know. We had some good times. Then he just upped and went off one day when I was at me Main's with Kerry." She peered into her tea-cup. "I'm better off without him," she said. "But you get scared sometimes. Want some more tea?"

"I don't think I've got time."

"Just a cup," Anne-Marie said, already up and unplugging the electric kettle to take it across for a re-fill. As she was about to turn on the tap she saw something on the draining board, and drove her thumb down, grinding it out. "Got you, you bugger," she said, then turned to Helen: "We got these bloody ants."

"Ants?"

"Whole estate's infected. From Egypt, they are: pharoah ants, they're called. Little brown sods. They breed in the central heating ducts, you see; that way they get into all the flats. Place is plagued with them." This unlikely exoticism (ants from Egypt?) struck Helen as comical, but she said nothing. Anne-Marie was staring out of the kitchen window and into the back-yard.

"You should tell them -” she said, though Helen wasn't certain whom she was being instructed to tell, “Tell them that ordinary people can't even walk the streets any longer – "Is it really so bad?" Helen said, frankly tiring of this catalogue of misfortunes.

Anne-Marie turned from the sink and looked at her hard.

We've had murders here," she said.

"Really?"

"We had one in the summer. An old man he was, from Ruskin. That's just next door. I didn't know him, but he was a friend of the sister of the woman next door. I forget his name."

"And he was murdered?"

"Cut to ribbons in his own front room. They didn't find him for almost a week."

"What about his neighbours? Didn't they notice his absence?"

Anne-Marie shrugged, as if the most important pieces of information – the murder and the man's isolation – had been exchanged, and any further enquiries into the problem were irrelevant. But Helen pressed the point. "Seems strange to me," she said.

Anne-Marie plugged in the filled kettle. "Well, it happened," she replied, unmoved.

"I'm not saying it didn't, I just -"

"His eyes had been taken out," she said, before Helen could voice any further doubts.

Helen winced. "No," she said, under her breath.

"That's the truth," Anne-Marie said. "And that wasn't all'd been done to him." She paused, for effect, then went on: "You wonder what kind of person's capable of doing things like that, don't you? You wonder." Helen nodded. She was thinking precisely the same thing.

"Did they ever find the man responsible?"

Anne-Marie snorted her disparagement. "Police don't give a damn what happens here. They keep off the estate as much as possible. When they do patrol all they do is pick up kids for getting drunk and that. They're afraid, you see. That's why they keep clear."

"Of this killer?"

"Maybe," Anne-Marie replied. "Then: He had a hook."

"A hook?"

"The man what done it. He had a hook, like Jack the Ripper."

Helen was no expert on murder, but she felt certain that the Ripper hadn't boasted a hook. It seemed churlish to question the truth of Anne-Marie's story however; though she silently wondered how much of this – the eyes taken out, the body rotting in the flat, the hook – was elaboration. The most scrupulous of reporters was surely tempted to embellish a story once in a while.

Anne-Marie had poured herself another cup of tea, and was about to do the same for her guest. "No thank you," Helen said, "I really should go."

"You married?" Anne-Marie asked, out of the blue.

"Yes. To a lecturer from the University."

"What's his name?"

"Trevor."

Anne-Marie put two heaped spoonfuls of sugar into her cup of tea. "Will you be coming back?" she asked. "Yes, I hope to. Later in the week. I want to take some photographs of the pictures in the maisonette across the court."

"Well, call in.

"I shall. And thank you for your help."

"That's all right," Anne-Marie replied. "You've got to tell somebody, haven't you?"

"The man apparently had a hook instead of a hand."

Trevor looked up from his plate of tagliatelle con prosciutto.

"Beg your pardon?"

Helen had been at pains to keep her recounting of this story as uncoloured by her own response as she could. She was interested to know what Trevor would make of it, and she knew that if she once signaled her own stance he would instinctively take an opposing view out of plain bloody-mindedness.

"He had a hook," she repeated, without inflexion.

Trevor put down his fork, and plucked at his nose, sniffing. "I didn't read anything about this," he said. "You don't look at the local press," Helen returned. "Neither of us do. Maybe it never made any of the nationals." "Geriatric Murdered By Hook-Handed Maniac'?" Trevor said, savouring the hyperbole. "I would have thought it very newsworthy. When was all of this supposed to have happened?"

"Sometime last summer. Maybe we were in Ireland."

"Maybe," said Trevor, taking up his fork again. Bending to his food, the polished lens of his spectacles reflected only the plate of pasta and chopped ham in front of him, not his eyes.

"Why do you say maybe?" Helen prodded.

"It doesn't sound quite right," he said. "In fact it sounds bloody preposterous."

"You don't believe it?" Helen said.

Trevor looked up from his food, tongue rescuing a speck of tagliatelle from the corner of his mouth. His face had relaxed into that non-committal expression of his – the same face he wore, no doubt, when listening to his students. "Do you believe it?" he asked Helen. It was a favourite time-gaining device of his, another seminar trick, to question the questioner.

"I'm not certain," Helen replied, too concerned to find some solid ground in this sea of doubts to waste energy scoring points.

"All right, forget the tale -" Trevor said, deserting his food for another glass of red wine." – What about the teller? Did you trust her?"

Helen pictured Anne-Marie's earnest expression as she told the story of the old man's murder. "Yes," she said. "Yes; I think I would have known if she'd been lying to me."

"So why's it so important, anyhow? I mean, whether she's lying or not, what the fuck does it matter?" It was a reasonable question, if irritatingly put. Why did it matter? Was it that she wanted to have her worst feelings about Spector Street proved false? That such an estate be filthy, be hopeless, be a dump where the undesirable and the disadvantaged were tucked out of public view – all that was a liberal commonplace, and she accepted it as an unpalatable social reality. But the story of the old man's murder and mutilation was something other. An image of violent death that, once with her, refused to part from her company.

She realized, to her chagrin, that this confusion was plain on her face, and that Trevor, watching her across the table, was not a little entertained by it.

"If it bothers you so much," he said, "why don't you go back there and ask around, instead of playing believe-in-it or-not over dinner?"

She couldn't help but rise to his remark. "I thought you liked guessing games," she said.

He threw her a sullen look.

"Wrong again."

The suggestion that she investigate was not a bad one, though doubtless he had ulterior motives for offering it. She viewed Trevor less charitably day by day. What she had once thought in him a fierce commitment to debate she now recognized as mere power-play. He argued, not for the thrill of dialectic, but because he was pathologically competitive. She had seen him, time and again, take up attitudes she knew he did not espouse, simply to spill blood. Nor, more's the pity, was he alone in this sport. Academe was one of the last strongholds of the professional timewaster. On occasion their circle seemed entirely dominated by educated fools, lost in a wasteland of stale rhetoric and hollow commitment.

From one wasteland to another. She returned to Spector Street the following day, armed with a flashgun in addition to her tripod and high-sensitive film. The wind was up today, and it was Arctic, more furious still for being trapped in the maze of passageways and courts. She made her way to number 14, and spent the next hour in its befouled confines, meticulously photographing both the bedroom and living-room walls. She had half expected the impact of the head in the bedroom to be dulled by re-acquaintance; it was not. Though she struggled to capture its scale and detail as best she could, she knew the photographs would be at best a dim echo of its perpetual howl. Much of its power lay in its context, of course. That such an image might be stumbled upon in surroundings so drab, so conspicuously lacking in mystery, was akin to finding an icon on a rubbish-heap: a gleaming symbol of transcendence from a world of toil and decay into some darker but more tremendous realm. She was painfully aware that the intensity of her response probably defied her articulation. Her vocabulary was analytic, replete with buzzwords and academic terminology, but woefully impoverished when it came to evocation. The photographs, pale as they would be, would, she hoped, at least hint at the potency of this picture, even if they couldn't conjure the way it froze the bowels.

When she emerged from the maisonette the wind was as uncharitable as ever, but the boy waiting outside – the same child as had attended upon her yesterday – was dressed as if for spring weather. He grimaced in his effort to keep the shudders at bay.

"Hello," Helen said.

"I waited," the child announced.

Waited?"

"Anne-Marie said you'd come back."

"I wasn't planning to come until later in the week," Helen said. "You might have waited a long time." The boy's grimace relaxed a notch. "It's all right," he said, "I've got nothing to do."

"What about school?"

"Don't like it," the boy replied, as if unobliged to be educated if it wasn't to his taste.

"I see," said Helen, and began to walk down the side of the quadrangle. The boy followed. On the patch of grass at the centre of the quadrangle several chairs and two or three dead saplings had been piled.

"What's this?" she said, half to herself.

"Bonfire Night," the boy informed her. "Next week."

"Of course."

"You going to see Anne-Marie?" he asked.

"Yes."

"She's not in'

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Well, perhaps you can help me…"She stopped and turned to face the child; smooth sacs of fatigue hung beneath his eyes. "I heard about an old man who was murdered near here," she said to him. "In the summer. Do you know anything about that?"

"No."

"Nothing at all? You don't remember anybody getting killed?"

"No," the boy said again, with impressive finality. "I don't remember."

Well; thank you anyway."

This time, when she retraced her steps back to the car, the boy didn't follow. But as she turned the corner out of the quadrangle she glanced back to see him standing on the spot where she'd left him, staring after her as if she were a madwoman.

By the time she had reached the car and packed the photographic equipment into the boot there were specks of rain in the wind, and she was sorely tempted to forget she'd ever heard Anne-Marie's story and make her way home, where the coffee would be warm even if the welcome wasn't. But she needed an answer to the question Trevor had put the previous night. Do you believe it?, he'd asked when she'd told him the story. She hadn't known how to answer then, and she still didn't. Perhaps (why did she sense this?) the terminology of verifiable truth was redundant here; perhaps the final answer to his question was not an answer at all, only another question. If so; so. She had to find out.

Ruskin Court was as forlorn as its fellows, if not more so. It didn't even boast a bonfire. On the third floor balcony a woman was taking washing in before the rain broke; on the grass in the centre of the quadrangle two dogs were absent-mindedly rutting, the fuckee staring up at the blank sky. As she walked along the empty pavement she set her face determinedly; a purposeful look, Bernadette had once said, deterred attack. When she caught sight of the two women talking at the far end of the court she crossed over to them hurriedly, grateful for their presence. "Excuse me?"

The women, both in middle-age, ceased their animated exchange and looked her over.

"I wonder if you can help me?"

She could feel their appraisal, and their distrust; they went undisguised. One of the pair, her face florid, said plainly: "What do you want?"

Helen suddenly felt bereft of the least power to charm. What was she to say to these two that wouldn't make her motives appear ghoulish? "I was told… she began, and then stumbled, aware that she would get no assistance from either woman."…I was told there'd been a murder near here. Is that right?"

The florid woman raised eyebrows so plucked they were barely visible. "Murder?" she said.

"Are you from the press?" the other woman enquired. The years bad soured her features beyond sweetening. Her small mouth was deeply lined; her hair, which had been dyed brunette, showed a half-inch of grey at the roots. "No, I'm not from the press," Helen said, "I'm a friend of Anne-Marie's, in Butts' Court." This claim of friend stretched the truth, but it seemed to mellow the women somewhat.

"Visiting are you?" the florid woman asked.

"In a manner of speaking -"

"You missed the warm spell -" Anne-Marie was telling me about somebody who'd been murdered here, during the summer. I was curious about it."

"Is that right?"

" – do you know anything about it?"

"Lots of things go on around here," said the second woman. "You don't know the half of it."

"So it's true," Helen said.

"They had to close the toilets," the first woman put in.

"That's right. They did," the other said.

"The toilets?" Helen said. What had this to do with the old man's death?

"It was terrible," the first said. "Was it your Frank, Josie, who told you about it?"

"No, not Frank," Josie replied. "Frank was still at sea. It was Mrs. Tyzack."

The witness established, Josie relinquished the story to her companion, and turned her gaze back upon Helen. The suspicion bad not yet died from her eyes.

"This was only the month before last," Josie said. "Just about the end of August. It was August, wasn't it?" She looked to the other woman for verification. "You've got the head for dates, Maureen."

Maureen looked uncomfortable. "I forget," she said, clearly unwilling to offer testimony.

"I'd like to know," Helen said. Josie, despite her companion's reluctance, was eager to oblige.

"There's some lavatories," she said, “outside the shops – you know, public lavatories. I'm not quite sure how it all happened exactly, but there used to be a boy… well, he wasn't a boy really, I mean he was a man of twenty or more, but he was – she fished for the words,"… mentally subnormal, I suppose you'd say. His mother used to have to take him around like he was a four year old. Anyhow, she let him go into the lavatories while she went to that little supermarket, what's it called?" she turned to Maureen for a prompt, but the other woman just looked back, her disapproval plain. Josie was ungovernable, however. "Broad daylight, this was," she said to Helen. "Middle of the day. Anyhow, the boy went to the toilet, and the mother was in the shop. And after a while, you know how you do, she's busy shopping, she forgets about him, and then she thinks he's been gone a long time…"

At this juncture Maureen couldn't prevent herself from butting in: the accuracy of the story apparently took precedence over her wariness.

" – She got into an argument," she corrected Josie, “with the manager. About some bad bacon she'd had from him. That was why she was such a tune.

"I see," said Helen.

" – anyway," said Josie, picking up the tale, “she finished her shopping and when she came out he still wasn't there -” "So she asked someone from the supermarket – Maureen began, but Josie wasn't about to have her narrative snatched back at this vital juncture.

"She asked one of the men from the supermarket -” she repeated over Maureen's interjection, “to go down into the lavatory and find him."

"It was terrible," said Maureen, clearly picturing the atrocity in her mind's eye.

"He was lying on the floor, in a pool of blood."

"Murdered?"

Josie shook her head. "He'd have been better off dead. He'd been attacked with a razor – she let this piece of information sink in before delivering the coup de grace, – and they'd cut off his private parts. Just cut them off and flushed them down a toilet. No reason on earth to do it."

"Oh my God."

"Better off dead," Josie repeated. "I mean, they can't mend something like that, can they?"

The appalling tale was rendered worse still by the sang-froid of the teller, and by the casual repetition of "Better off dead'.

"The boy," Helen said, "Was he able to describe his attackers?"

"No," said Josie, “he's practically an imbecile. He can't string more than two words together."

"And nobody saw anyone go into the lavatory? Or leaving it?"

"People come and go all the time – Maureen said. This, though it sounded like an adequate explanation, had not been Helen's experience. There was not a great bustle in the quadrangle and passageways; far from it. Perhaps the shopping mall was busier, she reasoned, and might offer adequate cover for such a crime.

"So they haven't found the culprit," she said.

"No," Josie replied, her eyes losing their fervor. The crime and its immediate consequences were the nub of this story; she had little or no interest in either the culprit or his capture.

"We're not safe in our own beds," Maureen observed. "You ask anyone."

"Anne-Marie said the same," Helen replied. "That's how she came to tell me about the old man. Said he was murdered during the summer, here in Ruskin Court."

"I do remember something," Josie said. "There was some talk I heard. An old man, and his dog. He was battered to death, and the dog ended up… I don't know. It certainly wasn't here. It must have been one of the other estates." "Are you sure?"

The woman looked offended by this slur on her memory. "Oh yes,"

she said, "I mean if it had been here, we'd have known the story, wouldn't we?"

Helen thanked the pair for their help and decided to take a stroll around the quadrangle anyway, just to see how many more maisonettes were out of operation here. As in Butts' Court, many of the curtains were drawn and all the doors locked. But then if Spector Street was under siege from a maniac capable of the murder and mutilation such as she'd heard described, she was not surprised that the residents took to their homes and stayed there. There was nothing much to see around the court. All the unoccupied maisonettes and flats had been recently sealed, to judge by a litter of nails left on a doorstep by the council workmen. One sight did catch her attention however. Scrawled on the paving stones she was walking over – and all but erased by rain and the passage of feet – the same phrase she'd seen in the bedroom of number 14: Sweets to the sweet. The words were so benign; why did she seem to sense menace in them? Was it in their excess, perhaps, in the sheer overabundance of sugar upon sugar, honey upon honey?

She walked on, though the rain persisted, and her walkabout gradually led her away from the quadrangles and into a concrete no-man's-land through which she had not previously passed. This was – or had been – the site of the estate's amenities. Here was the children's playground, its metal-framed rides overturned, its sandpit fouled by dogs, its paddling pool empty. And here too were the shops. Several had been boarded up; those that hadn't were dingy and unattractive, their windows protected by heavy wire-mesh.

She walked along the row, and rounded a corner, and there in front of her was a squat brick building. The public lavatory, she guessed, though the signs designating it as such had gone. The iron gates were closed and padlocked. Standing in front of the charmless building, the wind gusting around her legs, she couldn't help but think of what had happened here. Of the man-child, bleeding on the floor, helpless to cry out. It made her queasy even to contemplate it. She turned her thoughts instead to the felon. What would he look like, she wondered, a man capable of such depravities? She tried to make an image of him, but no detail she could conjure carried sufficient force. But then monsters were seldom very terrible once hauled into the plain light of day. As long as this man was known only by his deeds he held untold power over the imagination; but the human truth beneath the terrors would, she knew, be bitterly disappointing. No monster he; just a whey-faced apology for a man more needful of pity than awe. The next gust of wind brought the rain on more heavily. It was time, she

decided, to be done with adventures for the day. Turning her back on the public lavatories she hurried back through the quadrangles to the refuge of the car, the icy rain needling her face to numbness.

The dinner guests looked gratifyingly appalled at the story, and Trevor, to judge by the expression on his face, was furious. It was done now, however; there was no taking it back. Nor could she deny her satisfaction she took in having silenced the inter-departmental babble about the table. It was Bernadette, Trevor's assistant in the History Department, who broke the agonizing hush.

"When was this?"

"During the summer," Helen told her.

"I don't recall reading about it," said Archie, much the better for two hours of drinking; it mellowed a tongue which was otherwise fulsome in its self-coruscation.

"Perhaps the police are suppressing it," Daniel commented.

"Conspiracy?" said Trevor, plainly cynical.

"It's happening all the time," Daniel shot back.

"Why should they suppress something like this?" Helen said. "It doesn't make sense."

"Since when has police procedure made sense?" Daniel replied.

Bernadette cut in before Helen could answer. "We don't even bother to read about these things any longer," she said. "Speak for yourself," somebody piped up, but she ignored them and went on: "We're punch-drunk with violence. We don't see it any longer, even when it's in front of our noses." "On the screen every night," Archie put in, "Death and disaster in full colour."

"There's nothing very modern about that," Trevor said. "An Elizabethan would have seen death all the time. Public executions were a very popular form of entertainment."

The table broke up into a cacophony of opinions. After two hours of polite gossip the dinner-party had suddenly caught fire. Listening to the debate rage Helen was sorry she hadn't had time to have the photographs processed and printed; the graffiti would have added further fuel to this exhilarating row. It was Purcell, as usual, who was

the last to weigh in with his point of view; and again, as usual it was devastating.

"Of course, Helen, my sweet – he began, that affected weariness in his voice edged with the anticipation of controversy '- your witnesses could all be lying, couldn't they?"

The talking around the table dwindled, and all heads turned in Purcell's direction. Perversely, he ignored the attention he'd garnered, and turned to whisper in the ear of the boy he'd brought – a new passion who would, on past form, be discarded in a matter of weeks for another pretty urchin.

"Lying?" Helen said. She could feel herself bristling at the observation already, and Purcell had only spoken a dozen words.

"Why not?" the other replied, lifting his glass of wine to his lips. "Perhaps they're all weaving some elaborate fiction or other. The story of the spastic's mutilation in the public toilet. The murder of the old man. Even that hook. All quite familiar elements. You must be aware that there's something traditional about these atrocity stories. One used to exchange them all the time; there was a certain fission in them. Something competitive maybe, in attempting to find a new detail to add to the collective fiction; a fresh twist that would render the tale that little bit more appalling when you passed it on."

"It may be familiar to you – said Helen defensively. Purcell was always so poised; it irritated her. Even if there were validity in his argument – which she doubted – she was damned if she'd concede it." – I've never heard this kind of story before."

"Have you not?" said Purcell, as though she were admitting to illiteracy. "What about the lovers and the escaped lunatic, have you heard that one?"

"I've heard that…" Daniel said.

"The lover is disemboweled – usually by a hook-handed man – and the body left on the top of the car, while the fiancй cowers inside. It's a cautionary tale, warning of the evils of rampant heterosexuality." The joke won a round of laughter from everyone but Helen. "These stories are very common."

"So you're saying that they're telling me lies -" she protested.

"Not lies, exactly -"

"You said lies."

"I was being provocative," Purcell returned, his placatory tone more enraging than ever. "I don't mean to imply there's any serious mischief in it. But you must concede that so far you haven't met a single witness. All these events have happened at some unspecified date to some unspecified person. They are reported at several removes. They occurred at best to the brothers of friends of distant relations. Please consider the possibility that perhaps these events do not exist in the real world at all, but are merely titillation for bored housewives – Helen didn't make an argument in return, for the simple reason that she lacked one. Purcell's point about the conspicuous absence of witnesses was perfectly sound; she herself had wondered about it. It was strange, too, the way the women in Ruskin Court had speedily consigned the old man's murder to another estate, as though these atrocities always occurred just out of sight – round the next corner, down the next passageway – but never here.

"So why?" said Bernadette.

"Why what?" Archie puzzled.

"The stories. Why tell these horrible stories if they're not true?"

"Yes," said Helen, throwing the controversy back into Purcell's ample lap. "Why?"

Purcell preened himself, aware that his entry into the debate had changed the basic assumption at a stroke. "I don't know," he said, happy to be done with the game now that he'd shown his arm. "You really mustn't take me too seriously, Helen. I try not to." The boy at Purcell's side tittered.

"Maybe it's simply taboo material," Archie said.

"Suppressed – Daniel prompted.

"Not the way you mean it," Archie retorted. "The whole world isn't politics, Daniel."

"Such naivetй."

"What's so taboo about death?" Trevor said. "Bernadette already pointed out: it's in front of us all the time. Television; newspapers."

"Maybe that's not close enough," Bernadette suggested.

"Does anyone mind if I smoke?" Purcell broke in. "Only dessert seems to have been indefinitely postponed -" Helen ignored the remark, and asked Bernadette what she meant by 'not close enough'?

Bernadette shrugged. "I don't know precisely," she confessed, "maybe just that death has to be near; we have to know it's just round the corner. The television's not intimate enough -"

Helen frowned. The observation made some sense to her, but in the clutter of the moment she couldn't root out its significance.

"Do you think they're stories too?" she asked.

"Andrew has a point -" Bernadette replied.

"Most kind," said Purcell. "Has somebody got a match? The boy's pawned my lighter."

" – about the absence of witnesses."

"All that proves is that I haven't met anybody who's actually seen anything," Helen countered, "not that witnesses don't exist."

"All right," said Purcell. "Find me one. If you can prove to me that your atrocity-monger actually lives and breathes, I'll stand everyone dinner at Appollinaires. How's that? Am I generous to a fault, or do I just know when I can't lose?" He laughed, knocking on the table with his knuckles by way of applause.

"Sounds good to me," said Trevor. "What do you say, Helen?"

She didn't go back to Spector Street until the following Monday, but all weekend she was there in thought: standing outside the locked toilet, with the wind bringing rain; or in the bedroom, the portrait looming. Thoughts of the estate claimed all her concern. When, late on Saturday afternoon, Trevor found some petty reason for an argument, she let the insults pass, watching him perform the familiar ritual of self-martyrdom without being touched by it in the least. Her indifference only enraged him further. He stormed out in high dudgeon, to visit whichever of his women was in favour this month. She was glad to see the back of him. When he failed to return that night she didn't even think of weeping about it. He was foolish and vacuous. She despaired of ever seeing a haunted look in his dull eyes; and what worth was a man who could not be haunted?

He did not return Sunday night either, and it crossed her mind the

following morning, as she parked the car in the heart of the estate, that nobody even knew she had come, and that she might lose herself for days here and nobody be any the wiser. Like the old man Anne-Marie had told her about: lying forgotten in his favourite armchair with his eyes hooked out, while the flies feasted and the butter went rancid on the table.

It was almost Bonfire Night, and over the weekend the small heap of combustibles in Butts' Court had grown to a substantial size. The construction looked unsound, but that didn't prevent a number of boys and young adolescents clambering over it and into it. Much of its bulk was made up of furniture, filched, no doubt, from boarded up properties. She doubted if it could burn for any time: if it did, it would go chokingly. Four times, on her way across to Anne-Marie's house, she was waylaid by children begging for money to buy fireworks.

"Penny for the guy', they'd say, though none had a guy to display.

She had emptied her pockets of change by the time she reached the front door.

Anne-Marie was in today, though there was no welcoming smile. She simply stared at her visitor as if mesmerised. "I hope you don't mind me calling…"

Anne-Marie made no reply.

"I just wanted a word."

"I'm busy," the woman finally announced. There was no invitation inside, no offer of tea.

"Oh. Well… it won't take more than a moment."

The back door was open and the draught blew through the house. Papers were flying about in the back yard. Helen could see them lifting into the air like vast white moths.

"What do you want?" Anne-Marie asked.

"Just to ask you about the old man."

The woman frowned minutely. She looked as if she was sickening, Helen thought: her face had the colour and texture of stale dough, her hair was lank and greasy.

"What old man?"

"Last time I was here, you told me about an old man who'd been murdered, do you remember?" "No."

"You said he lived in the next court."

"I don't remember," Anne-Marie said.

"But you distinctly told me -"

Something fell to the floor in the kitchen, and smashed. Anne-Marie flinched, but did not move from the doorstep, her arm barring Helen's way into the house. The hallway was littered with the child's toys, gnawed and battered. "Are you all right?"

Anne-Marie nodded. "I've got work to do," she said.

"And you don't remember telling me about the old man?"

"You must have misunderstood," Anne-Marie replied, and then, her voice hushed: "You shouldn't have come. Everybody knows."

"Knows what?"

The girl had begun to tremble. "You don't understand, do you? You think people aren't watching?" "What does it matter? All I asked was – "I don't know anything," Anne-Marie reiterated. "Whatever I said to you, I lied about it."

"Well, thank you anyway," Helen said, too perplexed by the confusion of signals from Anne-Marie to press the point any further.

Almost as soon as she had turned from the door she heard the lock snap closed behind her.

That conversation was only one of several disappointments that morning brought. She went back to the row of shops, and visited the supermarket that Josie had spoken of. There she inquired about the lavatories, and their recent history. The supermarket had only changed hands in the last month, and the new owner, a taciturn Pakistani, insisted that he knew nothing of when or why the lavatories had been closed. She was aware, as she made her enquiries, of being scrutinized by the other customers in the shop; she felt like a pariah. That feeling deepened when, after leaving the supermarket, she saw Josie emerging from the launderette, and called after her only to have

the woman pick up her pace and duck away into the maze of corridors. Helen followed, but rapidly lost both her quarry and her way. Frustrated to the verge of tears, she stood amongst the overturned rubbish bags, and felt a surge of contempt for her foolishness. She didn't belong here, did she? How many times had she criticized others for their presumption in claiming to understand societies they had merely viewed from afar? And here was she, committing the same crime, coming here with her camera and her questions, using the lives (and deaths) of these people as fodder for party conversation. She didn't blame Anne-Marie for turning her back; had she deserved better?

Tired and chilled, she decided it was time to concede Purcell's point. It was all fiction she had been told. They had played with her – sensing her desire to be fed some horrors – and she, the perfect fool, had fallen for every ridiculous word. It was time to pack up her credulity and go home.

One call demanded to be made before she returned to the car however: she wanted to look a final time at the painted head. Not as an anthropologist amongst an alien tribe, but as a confessed ghost train rider: for the thrill of it. Arriving at number 14, however, she faced the last and most crushing disappointment. The maisonette had been sealed up by conscientious council workmen. The door was locked; the front window boarded over.

She was determined not to be so easily defeated however. She made her way around the back of Butts' Court and located the yard of number 14 by simple mathematics. The gate was wedged closed from the inside, but she pushed hard upon it, and, with effort on both parts, it opened. A heap of rubbish – rotted carpets, a box of rain-sodden magazines, a denuded Christmas tree – had blocked it.

She crossed the yard to the boarded up windows, and peered through the slats of wood. It wasn't bright outside, but it was darker still within; it was difficult to catch more than the vaguest hint of the painting on the bedroom wall. She pressed her face close to the wood, eager for a final glimpse.

A shadow moved across the room, momentarily blocking her view. She stepped back from the window, startled, not certain of what she'd seen. Perhaps merely her own shadow, cast through the window? But then she hadn't moved; it had.

She approached the window again, more cautiously. The air

vibrated; she could hear a muted whine from somewhere, though she couldn't be certain whether it came from inside or out. Again, she put her face to the rough boards, and suddenly, something leapt at the window. This time she let out a cry. There was a scrabbling sound from within, as nails raked the wood.

A dog!; and a big one to have jumped so high.

"Stupid," she told herself aloud. A sudden sweat bathed her.

The scrabbling had stopped almost as soon as it had started, but she couldn't bring herself to go back to the window. Clearly the workmen who had sealed up the maisonette had failed to check it properly, and incarcerated the animal by mistake. It was ravenous, to judge by the slavering she'd heard; she was grateful she hadn't attempted to break in. The dog – hungry, maybe half-mad in the stinking darkness – could have taken out her throat.

She stared at the boarded-up window. The slits between the boards were barely a half-inch wide, but she sensed that the animal was up on its hind legs on the other side, watching her through the gap. She could hear its panting now that her own breath was regularizing; she could hear its claws raking the sill.

"Bloody thing…" she said. "Damn well stay in there."

She backed off towards the gate. Hosts of wood-lice and spiders, disturbed from their nests by moving the carpets behind the gate, were scurrying underfoot, looking for a fresh darkness to call home.

She closed the gate behind her, and was making her way around the front of the block when she heard the sirens; two ugly spirals of sound that made the hair on the back of her neck tingle. They were approaching. She picked up her speed, and came round into Butts' Court in time to see several policemen crossing the grass behind the bonfire and an ambulance mounting the pavement and driving around to the other side of the quadrangle. People had emerged from their flats and were standing on their balconies, staring down. Others were walking around the court, nakedly curious, to join a gathering congregation. Helen's stomach seemed to drop to her bowels when she realized where the hub of interest lay: at Anne-Marie's doorstep. The police were clearing a path through the throng for the ambulance men. A second police-car had followed the route of the ambulance onto the pavement; two plain-clothes officers were getting out.

She walked to the periphery of the crowd. What little talk there was

amongst the on-lookers was conducted in low voices; one or two of the older women were crying. Though she peered over the heads of the spectators she could see nothing. Turning to a bearded man, whose child was perched on his shoulders, she asked what was going on. He didn't know. Somebody dead, he'd heard, but he wasn't certain.

"Anne-Marie?" she asked.

A woman in front of her turned and said: "You know her?" almost awed, as if speaking of a loved one. "A little," Helen replied hesitantly. "Can you tell me what's happened?"

The woman involuntarily put her hand to her mouth, as if to stop the words before they came. But here they were nevertheless: "The child -"she said.

"Kerry?"

"Somebody got into the house around the back. Slit his throat."

Helen felt the sweat come again. In her mind's eye the newspapers rose and fell in Anne-Marie's yard. "No," she said.

"Just like that."

She looked at the tragedian who was trying to sell her this obscenity, and said, "No," again. It defied belief; yet her denials could not silence the horrid comprehension she felt.

She turned her back on the woman and paddled her way out of the crowd. There would be nothing to see, she knew, and even if there had been she had no desire to look. These people – still emerging from their homes as the story spread – were exhibiting an appetite she was disgusted by. She was not of them; would never be of them. She wanted to slap every eager face into sense; wanted to say: "It's pain and grief you're going to spy on. Why? Why?" But she had no courage left. Revulsion had drained her of all but the energy to wander away, leaving the crowd to its sport.

Trevor had come home. He did not attempt an explanation of his absence, but waited for her to cross-question him. When she failed to do so he sank into an easy bonhomie that was worse than his expectant silence. She was dimly aware that her disinterest was probably more unsettling for him than the histrionics he had been anticipating. She couldn't have cared less.

She tuned the radio to the local station, and listened for news. It came surely enough, confirming what the woman in the crowd had told her. Kerry Latimer was dead. Person or persons unknown had gained access to the house via the back yard and murdered the child while he played on the kitchen floor. A police spokesman mouthed the usual platitudes, describing Kerry's death as an 'unspeakable crime', and the miscreant as 'a dangerous and deeply disturbed individual'. For once, the rhetoric seemed justified, and the man's voice shook discernibly when he spoke of the scene that had confronted the officers in the kitchen of Anne-Marie's house.

"Why the radio?" Trevor casually inquired, when Helen had listened for news through three consecutive bulletins. She saw no point in withholding her experience at Spector Street from him; he would find out sooner or later. Coolly, she gave him a bald outline of what had happened at Butts' Court.

"This Anne-Marie is the woman you first met when you went to the estate; am I right?"

She nodded, hoping he wouldn't ask her too many questions. Tears were close, and she had no intention of breaking down in front of him.

"So you were right," he said.

"Right?"

"About the place having a maniac."

"No," she said. "No."

"But the kid -”

She got up and stood at the window, looking down two storeys into the darkened street below. Why did she feel the need to reject the conspiracy theory so urgently?; why was she now praying that Purcell had been right, and that all she'd been told had been lies? She went back and back to the way Anne-Marie had been when she'd visited her that morning: pale, jittery; expectant. She had been like a woman anticipating some arrival, hadn't she?, eager to shoo unwanted visitors away so that she could turn back to the business of waiting. But waiting for what, or whom? Was it possible that Anne-Marie actually knew the murderer? Had perhaps invited him into the house? "I hope they find the bastard," she said, still watching the street.

"They will," Trevor replied. "A baby-murderer, for Christ's sake.

They'll make it a high priority." A man appeared at the corner of the street, turned, and whistled. A large Alsatian came to heel, and the two set off down towards the Cathedral.

"The dog," Helen murmured.

"What?"

She had forgotten the dog in all that had followed. Now the shock she'd felt as it had leapt at the window shook her again.

"What dog?" Trevor pressed.

"I went back to the flat today – where I took the pictures of the graffiti. There was a dog in there. Locked in." "So?"

"It'll starve. Nobody knows it's there."

"How do you know it wasn't locked in to kennel it?"

"It was making such a noise – she said.

"Dogs bark," Trevor replied. "That's all they're good for."

"No -" she said very quietly, remembering the noises through the boarded window. "It didn't bark…" "Forget the dog," Trevor said. "And the child. There's nothing you can do about it. You were just passing through." His words only echoed her own thoughts of earlier in the day, but somehow – for reasons that she could find no words to convey – that conviction had decayed in the last hours. She was not just passing through. Nobody ever just passed through; experience always left its mark. Sometimes it merely scratched; on occasion it took off limbs. She did not know the extent of her present wounding, but she knew it more profound than she yet understood, and it made her afraid.

"We're out of booze," she said, emptying the last dribble of whisky into her tumbler.

Trevor seemed pleased to have a reason to be accommodating. "I'll go out, shall I?" he said. "Get a bottle or two?" "Sure," she replied. "If you like."

He was gone only half an hour; she would have liked him to have been longer. She didn't want to talk, only to sit and think through the unease in her belly. Though Trevor had dismissed her concern for the

dog – and perhaps justifiably so – she couldn't help but go back to the locked maisonette in her mind's eye: to picture again the raging face on the bedroom wall, and hear the animal's muffled growl as it pawed the boards over the window. Whatever Trevor had said, she didn't believe the place was being used as a makeshift kennel. No, the dog was imprisoned in there, no doubt of it, running round and round, driven, in its desperation, to eat its own feces, growing more insane with every hour that passed. She became afraid that somebody – kids maybe, looking for more tinder for their bonfire would break into the place, ignorant of what it contained. It wasn't that she feared for the intruders' safety, but that the dog, once liberated, would come for her. It would know where she was (so her drunken head construed) and come sniffing her out.

Trevor returned with the whisky, and they drank together until the early hours, when her stomach revolted. She took refuge in the toilet – Trevor outside asking her if she needed anything, her telling him weakly to leave her alone. When, an hour later, she emerged, he had gone to bed. She did not join him, but lay down on the sofa and dozed through until dawn.

The murder was news. The next morning it made all the tabloids as a front page splash, and found prominent positions in the heavyweights too. There were photographs of the stricken mother being led from the house, and others, blurred but potent, taken over the back yard wall and through the open kitchen door. Was that blood on the floor, or shadow?

Helen did not bother to read the articles – her aching head rebelled at the thought – but Trevor, who had brought the newspapers in, was eager to talk. She couldn't work out if this was further peacemaking on his part, or a genuine interest in the issue.

"The woman's in custody," he said, poring over the Daily Telegraph. It was a paper he was politically averse to, but its coverage of violent crime was notoriously detailed.

The observation demanded Helen's attention, unwilling or not. "Custody?" she said. "Anne-Marie?" "Yes."

"Let me see."

He relinquished the paper, and she glanced over the page.

"Third column," Trevor prompted.

She found the place, and there it was in black and white. Anne-Marie had been taken into custody for questioning to justify the time-lapse between the estimated hour of the child's death, and the time that it had been reported. Helen read the relevant sentences over again, to be certain that she'd understood properly. Yes, she had. The police pathologist estimated Kerry to have died between six and six-thirty that morning; the murder had not been reported until twelve.

She read the report over a third and fourth time, but repetition did not change the horrid facts. The child had been murdered before dawn. When she had gone to the house that morning Kerry had already been dead four hours. The body had been in the kitchen, a few yards down the hallway from where she had stood, and Anne-Marie had said nothing. That air of expectancy she had had about her – what had it signified? That she awaited some cue to lift the receiver and call the police?

"My Christ…" Helen said, and let the paper drop.

"What?"

"I have to go to the police."

"Why?"

"To tell them I went to the house," she replied. Trevor looked mystified. "The baby was dead, Trevor. When I saw Anne-Marie yesterday morning, Kerry was already dead."

She rang the number given in the paper for any persons offering information, and half an hour later a police car came to pick her up. There was much that startled her in the two hours of interrogation that followed, not least the fact that nobody had reported her presence on the estate to the police, though she had surely been noticed. "They don't want to know -" the detective told her," – you'd think a place like that would be swarming with witnesses. If it is, they're not coming forward. A crime like this…"

"Is it the first?" she said.

He looked at her across a chaotic desk. "First?"

"I was told some stories about the estate. Murders. This summer."

The detective shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. There's been a spate of muggings; one woman was put in hospital for a week or so.

But no; no murders."

She liked the detective. His eyes flattered her with their lingering, and his face with their frankness. Past caring whether she sounded foolish or not, she said: "Why do they tell lies like that. About people having their eyes cut out. Terrible things."

The detective scratched his long nose. "We get it too," he said. "People come in here, they confess to all kinds of crap. Talk all night, some of them, about things they've done, or think they've done. Give you it all in the minutest detail. And when you make a few calls, it's all invented. Out of their minds."

"Maybe if they didn't tell you the stories…, they'd actually go out and do it."

The detective nodded. "Yes," he said. "God help us. You might be right at that."

And the stories she'd been told, were they confessions of uncommitted crimes?, accounts of the worst imaginable, imagined to keep fiction from becoming fact? The thought chased its own tail: these terrible stories still needed a first cause, a well-spring from which they leapt. As she walked home through the busy streets she wondered how many of her fellow citizens knew such stories. Were these inventions common currency, as Purcell had claimed? Was there a place, however small, reserved in every heart for the monstrous?

"Purcell rang," Trevor told her when she got home. "To invite us out to dinner."

The invitation wasn't welcome, and she made a face.

"Appollinaires, remember?" he reminded her. "H e said he'd take us all to dinner, if you proved him wrong." The thought of getting a dinner out of the death of Anne-Marie's infant was grotesque, and she said so. "He'll be offended if you turn him down."

"I don't give a damn. I don't want dinner with Purcell."

"Please," he said softly. "He can get difficult; and I want to keep him smiling just at the moment." She glanced across at him. The look he'd put on made him resemble a drenched spaniel. Manipulative bastard, she thought; but said: "All right, I'll go. But don't expect any dancing on the tables."

"We'll leave that to Archie," he said. "I told Purcell we were free tomorrow night. Is that all right with you?" "Whenever."

"He's booking a table for eight o'clock."

The evening papers had relegated The Tragedy of Baby Kerry to a few column inches on an inside page. In lieu of much fresh news they simply described the house-to-house enquiries that were now going on at Spector Street. Some of the later editions mentioned that Anne-Marie had been released from custody after an extended period of questioning, and was now residing with friends. They also mentioned, in passing, that' the funeral was to be the following day.

Helen had not entertained any thoughts of going back to Spector Street for the funeral when she went to bed that night, but sleep seemed to change her mind, and she woke with the decision made for her.

Death had brought the estate to life. Walking through to Ruskin Court from the street she had never seen such numbers out and about. Many were already lining the curb to watch the funeral cortege pass, and looked to have claimed their niche early, despite the wind and the ever-present threat of rain. Some were wearing items of black clothing – a coat, a scarf – but the overall impression, despite the lowered voices and the studied frowns, was one of celebration. Children running around, untouched by reverence; occasional laughter escaping from between gossiping adults – Helen could feel an air of anticipation which made her spirits, despite the occasion, almost buoyant. Nor was it simply the presence of so many people that reassured her; she was, she conceded to herself, happy to be back here in Spector Street. The quadrangles, with their stunted saplings and their grey grass, were more real to her than the carpeted corridors she was used to walking; the anonymous faces on the balconies and streets meant more than her colleagues at the University. In a word, she felt home.

Finally, the cars appeared, moving at a snail's pace through the narrow streets. As the hearse came into view – its tiny white casket decked with flowers – a number of women in the crowd gave quiet voice to their grief. One on-looker fainted; a knot of anxious people gathered around her. Even the children were stilled now.

Helen watched, dry-eyed. Tears did not come very easily to her, especially in company. As the second car, containing Anne-Marie and two other women, drew level with her, Helen saw that the bereaved mother was also eschewing any public display of grief. She seemed,

indeed, to be almost elevated by the proceedings, sitting upright in the back of the car, her pallid features the source of much admiration. It was a sour thought, but Helen felt as though she was seeing Anne-Marie's finest hour; the one day in an otherwise anonymous life in which she was the centre of attention. Slowly, the cortege passed by and disappeared from view.

The crowd around Helen was already dispersing. She detached herself from the few mourners who still lingered at the curb and wandered through from the street into Butts' Court. It was her intention to go back to the locked maisonette, to see if the dog was still there. If it was, she would put her mind at rest by finding one of the estate caretakers and informing him of the fact.

The quadrangle was, unlike the other courts, practically empty. Perhaps the residents, being neighbours of Anne Marie's, had gone on to the Crematorium for the service. Whatever the reason, the place was eerily deserted. Only children remained, playing around the pyramid bonfire, their voices echoing across the empty expanse of the square. She reached the maisonette and was surprised to find the door open again, as it had been the first time she'd come here. The sight of the interior made her light-headed. How often in the past several days had she imagined standing here, gazing into that darkness. There was no sound from inside. The dog had surely run off; either that, or died. There could be no harm, could there?, in stepping into the place one final time, just to look at the face on the wall, and its attendant slogan.

Sweets to the sweet. She had never looked up the origins of that phrase. No matter, she thought. Whatever it had stood for once, it was transformed here, as everything was; herself included. She stood in the front room for a few moments, to allow herself time to savour the confrontation ahead. Far away behind her the children were screeching like mad birds.

She stepped over a clutter of furniture and towards the short corridor that joined living-room to bedroom, still delaying the moment. Her heart was quick in her: a smile played on her lips.

And there! At last! The portrait loomed, compelling as ever. She stepped back in the murky room to admire it more fully and her heel caught on the mattress that still lay in the corner. She glanced down. The squalid bedding had been turned over, to present its untorn face. Some blankets and a rag-wrapped pillow had been tossed over it. Something glistened amongst the folds of the uppermost blanket. She

bent down to look more closely and found there a handful of sweets – chocolates and caramels – wrapped in bright paper. And littered amongst them, neither so attractive nor so sweet, a dozen razor-blades. There was blood on several. She stood up again and backed away from the mattress, and as she did so a buzzing sound reached her ears from the next room. She turned, and the light in the bedroom diminished as a figure stepped into the gullet between her and the outside world. Silhouetted against the light, she could scarcely see the man in the doorway, but she smelt him. He smelt like candy-floss; and the buzzing was with him or in him.

"I just came to look -" she said," – at the picture."

The buzzing went on: the sound of a sleepy afternoon, far from here. The man in the doorway did not move. "Well…" she said, "I've seen what I wanted to see." She hoped against hope that her words would prompt him to stand aside and let her past, but he didn't move, and she couldn't find the courage to challenge him by stepping towards the door.

"I have to go," she said, knowing that despite her best efforts fear seeped between every syllable. "I'm expected…" That was not entirely untrue. Tonight they were all invited to Appollinaires for dinner. But that wasn't until eight, which was four hours away. She would not be missed for a long while yet.

"If you'll excuse me," she said.

The buzzing had quietened a little, and in the hush the man in the doorway spoke. His unaccented voice was almost as sweet as his scent.

"No need to leave yet," he breathed.

"I'm due… due…"

Though she couldn't see his eyes, she felt them on her, and they made her feel drowsy, like that summer that sang in her head.

"I came for you," he said.

She repeated the four words in her head. I came for you. If they were meant as a threat, they certainly weren't spoken as one.

"I don't… know you," she said.

"No," the man murmured. "But you doubted me."

"Doubted?"

"You weren't content with the stories, with what they wrote on the walls. So I was obliged to come." The drowsiness slowed her mind to a crawl, but she grasped the essentials of what the man was saying. That he was legend, and she, in disbelieving him, had obliged him to show his hand. She looked, now, down at those hands. One of them was missing. In its place, a hook.

"There will be some blame," he told her. "They will say your doubts shed innocent blood. But I say – what's blood for, if not for shedding? And in time the scrutiny will pass. The police will leave, the cameras will be pointed at some fresh horror, and they will be left alone, to tell stories of the Candyman again."

"Candyman?" she said. Her tongue could barely shape that blameless word.

"I came for you," he murmured so softly that seduction might have been in the air. And so saying, he moved through the passageway and into the light.

She knew him, without doubt. She had known him all along, in that place kept for terrors. It was the man on the wall. His portrait painter had not been a fantasist: the picture that howled over her was matched in each extraordinary particular by the man she now set eyes upon. He was bright to the point of gaudiness: his flesh a waxy yellow, his thin lips pale blue, his wild eyes glittering as if their irises were set with rubies. His jacket was a patchwork his trousers the same. He looked, she thought, almost ridiculous, with his bloodstained motley, and the hint of rouge on his jaundiced cheeks. But people were facile. They needed these shows and shams to keep their interest. Miracles; murders; demons driven out and stones roiled from tombs. The cheap glamour did not taint the sense beneath. It was only, in the natural history of the mind, the bright feathers that drew the species to mate with its secret self.

And she was almost enchanted. By his voice, by his colours, by the buzz from his body. She fought to resist the rapture, though. There was a monster here, beneath this fetching display; its nest of razors was at her feet, still drenched in blood. Would it hesitate to slither own throat if it once laid hands on her?

As the Candyman reached for her she dropped down and snatched

the blanket up, flinging it at him. A rain of razors and sweetmeats fell around his shoulders. The blanket followed, blinding him. But before she could snatch the moment to slip past him, the pillow which had lain on the blanket rolled in front of her.

It was not a pillow at all. Whatever the forlorn white casket she had seen in the hearse had contained, it was not the body of Baby Kerry. That was here, at her feet, its blood-drained face turned up to her. He was naked. His body showed everywhere signs of the fiend's attentions.

In the two heartbeats she took to register this last horror, the Candyman threw off the blanket. In his struggle to escape from its folds, his jacket had come unbuttoned, and she saw – though her senses protested – that the contents of his torso had rotted away, and the hollow was now occupied by a nest of bees. They swarmed in the vault of his chest, and encrusted in a seething mass the remnants of flesh that hung there. He smiled at her plain repugnance. "Sweets to the sweet," he murmured, and stretched his hooked hand towards her face. She could no longer see light from the outside world, nr hear the children playing in Butts' Court. There was no escape into a saner world than this. The Candyman filled her sight; her drained limbs had no strength to hold him at bay.

"Don't kill me," she breathed.

"Do you believe in me?" he said.

She nodded minutely. "How can I not?" she said.

"Then why do you want to live?"

She didn't understand, and was afraid her ignorance would prove fatal, so she said nothing.

"If you would learn," the fiend said, “just a little from me… you would not beg to live." His voice had dropped to a whisper. "I am rumour," he sang in her ear. "It's a blessed condition, believe me. To live in people's dreams; to be whispered at street-corners; but not have to be. Do you understand?"

Her weary body understood. Her nerves, tired of jangling, understood. The sweetness he offered was life without living: was to be dead, but remembered everywhere; immortal in gossip and graffiti.

"Be my victim," he said.

"No…" she murmured.

"I won't force it upon you," he replied, the perfect gentleman. "I won't oblige you to die. But think; think. If I kill you here – if I unhook you…" he traced the path of the promised wound with his hook. It ran from groin to neck. "Think how they would mark this place with their talk… point it out as they passed by and say: "She died there; the woman with the green eyes'. Your death would be a parable to frighten children with. Lovers would use it as an excuse to cling closer together…"

She had been right: this was a seduction.

"Was fame ever so easy?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'd prefer to be forgotten," she replied, “than be remembered like that."

He made a tiny shrug. "What do the good know?" he said. "Except what the bad teach them by their excesses?" He raised his hooked hand. "I said I would not oblige you to die and I'm true to my word. Allow me, though, a kiss at least…"

He moved towards her. She murmured some nonsensical threat, which he ignored. The buzzing in his body had risen in volume. The thought of touching his body, of the proximity of the insects, was horrid. She forced her lead-heavy arms up to keep him at bay.

His lurid face eclipsed the portrait on the wall. She couldn't bring herself to touch him, and instead stepped back. The sound of the bees rose; some, in their excitement, had crawled up his throat and were flying from his mouth. They climbed about his lips; in his hair.

She begged him over and over to leave her alone, but he would not be placated. At last she had nowhere left to retreat to; the wall was at her back. Steeling herself against the stings, she put her hands on his crawling chest and pushed. As she did so his hand shot out and around the back of her neck, the hook nicking the flushed skin of her throat. She felt blood come; felt certain he would open her jugular in one terrible slash. But he had given his word: and he was true to it.

Aroused by this sudden activity, the bees were everywhere. She felt them moving on her, searching for morsels of wax in her ears, and sugar at her lips. She made no attempt to swat them away. The hook was at her neck. If she so much as moved it would wound her. She was trapped, as in her childhood nightmares, with every chance of

escape stymied. When sleep bad brought her to such hopelessness – the demons on every side, waiting to tear her limb from limb – one trick remained. To let go; to give up all ambition to life, and leave her body to the dark. Now, as the Candyman's face pressed to hers, and the sound of bees blotted out even her own breath, she played that hidden hand. And, as surely as in dreams, the room and the fiend were painted out and gone.

She woke from brightness into dark. There were several panicked moments when she couldn't think of where she was, then several more when she remembered. But there was no pain about her body. She put her hand to her neck; it was, barring the nick of the hook, untouched. She was lying on the mattress she realized. Had she been assaulted as she lay in a faint? Gingerly, she investigated her body. She was not bleeding; her clothes were not disturbed. The Candyman had, it seemed, simply claimed his kiss.

She sat up. There was precious little light through the boarded window – and none from the front door. Perhaps it was closed, she reasoned. But no; even now she heard somebody whispering on the threshold. A woman's voice. She didn't move. They were crazy, these people. They had known all along what her presence in Butts' Court had summoned, and they had protected him – this honeyed psychopath; given him a bed and an offering of bonbons, hidden him away from prying eyes, and kept their silence when he brought blood to their doorsteps. Even Anne-Marie, dry-eyed in the hallway of her house, knowing that her child was dead a few yards away. The child! That was the evidence she needed. Somehow they had conspired to get the body from the casket (what had they substituted; a dead dog?) and brought it here – to the Candyman's tabernacle – as a toy, or a lover. She would take Baby Kerry with her – to the police – and tell the whole story. Whatever they believed of it – and that would probably be very little – the fact of the child's body was incontestable. That way at least some of the crazies would suffer for their conspiracy. Suffer for her suffering.

The whispering at the door had stopped. Now somebody was moving towards the bedroom. They didn't bring a light with them. Helen made herself small, hoping she might escape detection.

A figure appeared in the doorway. The gloom was too impenetrable for her to make out more than a slim figure, who bent down and picked up a bundle on the floor. A fall of blonde hair identified the newcomer as Anne-Marie: the bundle she was picking up was undoubtedly Kerry's corpse. Without looking in Helen's direction, the

mother about turned and made her way out of the bedroom.

Helen listened as the footsteps receded across the living-room. Swiftly, she got to her feet, and crossed to the passageway. From there she could vaguely see Anne-Marie's outline in the doorway of the maisonette. No lights burned in the quadrangle beyond. The woman disappeared and Helen followed as speedily as she could, eyes fixed on the door ahead. She stumbled once, and once again, but reached the door in time to see Anne-Marie's vague form in the night ahead.

She stepped out of the maisonette and into the open air. It was chilly; there were no stars. All the lights on the balconies and corridors were out, nor did any burn in the flats; not even the glow of a television. Butts' Court was deserted.

She hesitated before going in pursuit of the girl. Why didn't she slip away now?, cowardice coaxed her, and find her way back to the car. But if she did that the conspirators would have time to conceal the child's body. When she got back here with the police there would be sealed lips and shrugs, and she would be told she had imagined the corpse and the Candyman. All the terrors she had tasted would recede into rumour again. Into words on a wall. And every day she lived from now on she would loathe herself for not going in pursuit of sanity.

She followed. Anne-Marie was not making her way around the quadrangle, but moving towards the centre of the lawn in the middle of the court. To the bonfire! Yes; to the bonfire! It loomed in front of Helen now, blacker than the night-sky. She could just make out Anne-Marie's figure, moving to the edge of the piled timbers and furniture, and ducking to climb into its heart. This was how they planned to remove the evidence. To bury the child was not certain enough; but to cremate it, and pound the bones – who would ever know?

She stood a dozen yards from the pyramid and watched as Anne-Marie climbed out again and moved away, folding her figure into the darkness.

Quickly, Helen moved through the long grass and located the narrow space in amongst the piled timbers into which Anne-Marie had put the body. She thought she could see the pale form; it had been laid in a hollow. She couldn't reach it however. Thanking God that she was as slim as the mother, she squeezed through the narrow aperture. Her dress snagged on a nail as she did so. She turned round to disengage it, fingers trembling. When she turned back she had lost sight of the corpse.

She fumbled blindly ahead of her, her hands finding wood and rags and what felt like the back of an old armchair, but not the cold skin of the child. She had hardened herself against contact with the body: she had endured worse in the last hours than picking up a dead baby. Determined not to be defeated, she advanced a little further, her shins scraped and her fingers spiked with splinters. Flashes of light were appearing at the corners of her aching eyes; her blood whined in her ears. But there!; there!; the body was no more than a yard and a half ahead of her. She ducked down to reach beneath a beam of wood, but her fingers missed the forlorn bundle by millimeters. She stretched further, the whine in her head increasing, but still she could not reach the child. All she could do was bend double and squeeze into the hidey-hole the children had left in the centre of the bonfire.

It was difficult to get through. The space was so small she could barely crawl on hands and knees; but she made it. The child lay face down. She fought back the remnants of squeamishness and went to pick it up. As she did so, something landed on her arm. The shock startled her. She almost cried out, but swallowed the urge, and brushed the irritation away. It buzzed as it rose from her skin. The whine she had heard in her ears was not her blood, but the hive.

"I knew you'd come," the voice behind her said, and a wide hand covered her face. She fell backwards and the Candyman embraced her.

"We have to go," he said in her ear, as flickering light spilled between the stacked timbers. "Be on our way, you and I."

She fought to be free of him, to cry out for them not to light the bonfire, but he held her lovingly close. The light grew: warmth came with it; and through the kindling and the first flames she could see figures approaching the pyre out of the darkness of Butts' Court. They had been there all along: waiting, the lights turned out in their homes, and broken all along the corridors. Their final conspiracy.

The bonfire caught with a will, but by some trick of its construction the flames did not invade her hiding-place quickly; nor did the smoke creep through the furniture to choke her. She was able to watch how the children's faces gleamed; how the parents called them from going too close, and how they disobeyed; how the old women, their blood thin, warmed their hands and smiled into the flames. Presently the roar and the crackle became deafening, and the Candy-man let her scream herself hoarse in the certain knowledge that nobody could hear her, and even if they had would not have moved to claim her from the fire.

The bees vacated the fiend's belly as the air became hotter, and mazed the air with their panicked flight. Some, attempting escape, caught fire, and fell like tiny meteors to the ground. The body of Baby Kerry, which lay close to the creeping flames, began to cook. Its downy hair smoked, its back blistered.

Soon the heat crept down Helen's throat, and scorched her pleas away. She sank back, exhausted, into the Candyman's arms, resigned to his triumph. In moments they would be on their way, as he had promised, and there was no help for it.

Perhaps they would remember her, as he had said they might, finding her cracked skull in tomorrow's ashes. Perhaps she might become, in time, a story with which to frighten children. She had lied, saying she preferred death to such questionable fame; she did not. As to her seducer, he laughed as the conflagration sniffed them out. There was no permanence for him in this night's death. His deeds were on a hundred walls and a ten thousand lips, and should he be doubted again his congregation could summon him with sweetness. He had reason to laugh. So, as the flames crept upon them, did she, as through the fire she caught sight of a familiar face moving between the on-lookers. It was Trevor. He had forsaken his meal at Appollinaires and come looking for her.

She watched him questioning this fire-watcher and that, but they shook their heads, all the while staring at the pyre with smiles buried in their eyes. Poor dupe, she thought, following his antics. She willed him to look past the flames in the hope that he might see her burning. Not so that he could save her from death – she was long past hope of that but because she pitied him in his bewilderment and wanted to give him, though he would not have thanked her for it, something to be haunted by.

That, and a story to tell.

XXIII: THE MADONNA

Jerry Coloqhoun waited on the steps of the Leopold Road Swimming Pools for over thirty-five minutes before Garvey turned up, his feet steadily losing feeling as the cold crept up through the souls of his shoes. The time would come, he reassured himself, when he'd be the one to leave people waiting. Indeed such prerogative might not be so far away, if he could persuade Ezra Garvey to invest in the Pleasure Dome. It would require an appetite for risk, and substantial assets, but his contacts had assured him that Garvey, whatever his reputation, possessed both in abundance. The source of the man's money was not an issue in the proceedings, or so Jerry had persuaded himself. Many a nicer plutocrat had turned the project down flat in the last six months; in such circumstances fineness of feeling was a luxury he could scarcely afford.

He was not all that surprised by the reluctance of investors. These were difficult times, and risks were not to be undertaken lightly. More, it took a measure of imagination – a faculty not over-abundant amongst the moneyed he'd met – to see the Pools transformed into the gleaming amenity complex he envisaged. But his researches had convinced him that in an area like this – where houses once teetering on demolition were being bought up and refurbished by a generation of middle-class sybarites – that in such an area the facilities he had planned could scarcely fail to make money.

There was a further inducement. The Council, who owned the Pools, was eager to off-load the property as speedily as possible; it had debtors aplenty. Jerry's bribee at the Directorate of Community Services – the same man who'd happily filched the keys to the property for two bottles of gin – had told him that the building could be purchased for a song if the offer was made swiftly. It was all a question of good timing.

A skill, apparently, which Garvey lacked. By the time he arrived the numbness had spread north to Jerry's knees, and his temper had worn thin. He made no show of it, however, as Garvey got out of his chauffeur-driven Rover and came up the steps. Jerry had only spoken to him by telephone, and had expected a larger man, but despite the lack of stature there was no doubting Garvey's authority. It was there in the plain look of appraisal he gave Coloqhoun; in the joyless features; in the immaculate suit.

The pair shook hands.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Garvey."

The man nodded, but returned no pleasantry. Jerry, eager to be out of the cold, opened the front door and led the way inside.

"I've only got ten minutes," Garvey said.

"Fine," Jerry replied. "I just wanted to show you the lay-out."

"You've surveyed the place?"

"Of course."

This was a lie. Jerry had been over the building the previous August, courtesy of a contact in the Architects' Department, and had, since that time, looked at the place from the outside several times. But it had been five months since he'd actually stepped into the building; he hoped accelerating decay had not taken an unshakeable hold since then. They stepped into the vestibule. It smelled damp, but not overpoweringly so.

"There's no electricity on," he explained. "We have to go by torchlight." He fished the heavy-duty torch from his pocket and trained the beam on the inner door. It was padlocked. He stared at the lock, dumbfounded. If this door had been locked last time he was here, he didn't remember. He tried the single key he'd been given, knowing before he put it to the lock that the two were hopelessly mismatched. He cursed under his breath, quickly skipping through the options available. Either he and Garvey about-turned, and left the Pools to its secrets – if mildew, creeping rot and a roof that was within an ace of surrender could be classed as secrets – or else he made an attempt to break in. He glanced at Garvey, who had taken a prodigious cigar from his inside pocket and was stroking the end with a flame; velvet smoke billowed.

"I'm sorry about the delay," he said.

"It happens," Garvey returned, clearly unperturbed.

"I think strong-arm tactics may be called for," Jerry said, feeling out the other man's response to a break in. "Suits me."

Jerry quickly rooted about the darkened vestibule for an implement. In the ticket booth he found a metal-legged stool. Hoisting it out of

the booth he crossed back to the door – aware of Garvey's amused but benign gaze upon him – and, using one of the legs as a lever, broke a shackle of the padlock. The lock clattered to the tiled floor. "Open sesame," he murmured with some satisfaction, and pushed the door open for Garvey.

The sound of the falling lock seemed still to linger in the deserted corridors when they stepped through, its din receding towards a sigh as it diminished. The interior looked more inhospitable than Jerry had remembered. The fitful daylight that fell through the mildewed panes of the skylights along the corridor was blue-grey – the light and that which it fell upon vying in dreariness. Once, no doubt, the Leopold Road Pools had been a showcase of Deco design – of shining tiles and cunning mosaics worked into floor and wall. But not in Jerry's adult life, certainly. The tiles underfoot had long since lifted with the damp; along the walls they had fallen in their hundreds, leaving patterns of white ceramic and dark plaster like some vast and clueless crossword puzzle. The air of destitution was so profound that Jerry had half a mind to give up his attempt at selling the project to Garvey on the spot. Surely there was no hope of a sale here, even at the ludicrously low asking price. But Garvey seemed more engaged than Jerry had allowed. He was already stalking down the corridor, puffing on his cigar and grunting to himself as he went. It could be no more than morbid curiosity, Jerry felt, that took the developer deeper into this echoing mausoleum. And yet: "It's atmospheric. The place has possibilities," Garvey said. "I don't have much of a reputation as a philanthropist, Coloqhoun – you must know that – but I've got a taste for some of the finer things." He had paused in front of a mosaic depicting a nondescript mythological scene – fish, nymphs and sea-gods at play. He grunted appreciatively, describing the sinuous line of the design with the wet end of his cigar.

"You don't see craftsmanship like that nowadays," he commented. Jerry thought it unremarkable, but said, "It's superb."

"Show me the rest."

The complex had once boasted a host of facilities – sauna rooms, turkish baths, thermal baths – in addition to the two pools. These various areas were connected by a warren of passageways which, unlike the main corridor, had no skylights: torchlight had to suffice here. Dark or no, Garvey wanted to see all of the public areas. The ten minutes he had warned were his limit stretched into twenty and thirty, the exploration constantly brought to a halt as he discovered some new felicity to comment upon. Jerry listened with feigned

comprehension: he found the man's enthusiasm for the decor confounding.

"I'd like to see the pools now," Garvey announced when they'd made a thorough investigation of the subordinate amenities. Dutifully, Jerry led the way through the labyrinth towards the two pools. In a small corridor a little way from the Turkish Baths Garvey said: "Hush."

Jerry stopped walking. "What?"

"I heard a voice.

Jerry listened. The torch-beam, splashing off the tiles, threw a pale luminescence around them, which drained the blood from Garvey's features.

"I don't hear-"

"I said hush," Garvey snapped. He moved his head to and fro slowly. Jerry could hear nothing. Neither, now, could Garvey. He shrugged, and pulled on his cigar. It had gone out, killed by the damp air.

"A trick of the corridors," Jerry said. "The echoes in this place are misleading. Sometimes you hear your own footsteps coming back to meet you.

Garvey grunted again. The grunt seemed to be his most valued part of speech. "I did hear something," he said, clearly not satisfied with Jerry's explanation. He listened again. The corridors were pin-drop hushed. It was not even possible to hear the traffic in Leopold Road. At last, Garvey seemed content.

"Lead on," he said. Jerry did just that, though the route to the pools was by no means clear to him. They took several wrong turnings, winding their way through a maze of identical corridors, before they reached their intended destination.

"It's warm," said Garvey, as they stood outside the smaller of the two pools.

Jerry murmured his agreement. In his eagerness to reach the pools he had not noticed the steadily escalating temperature. But now that he stood still he could feel a film of sweat on his body. The air was humid, and it smelt not of damp and mildew, as elsewhere in the building, but of a sicklier, almost opulent, scent. He hoped Garvey, cocooned in the smoke of his re-lit cigar could not share the smell; it

was far from pleasant.

"The heating's on," Garvey said.

"It certainly seems like it," Jerry returned, though he couldn't think why. Perhaps the Department Engineers warmed the heating system through once in a while, to keep it in working order. In which case, were they in the bowels of the building somewhere? Perhaps Garvey had heard voices? He mentally constructed a line of explanation should their paths cross.

"The pools," he said, and pulled open one of the double-doors. The skylight here was even dirtier than those in the main corridor; precious little light illuminated the scene. Garvey was not to be thwarted, however. He stepped through the door and across to the lip of the pool. There was little to see; the surfaces here were covered with several years' growth of mould. On the bottom of the pool, barely discernible beneath the algae, a design had been worked into the tiles. A bright fish-eye glanced up at them, perfectly thoughtless.

"Always had a fear of water," Garvey said ruminatively as he stared into the drained pool. "Don't know where it comes from."

"Childhood," Jerry ventured.

"I don't think so," the other replied. "M y wife says it's the womb."

"The womb?"

"I didn't like swimming around in there, she says," he replied, with a smile that might have been at his own expense, but was more likely at that of his wife.

A short sound came to meet them across the empty expanse of the pool, as of something falling. Garvey froze. "You hear that?" he said. "There's somebody in here." His voice had suddenly risen half an octave.

"Rats," Jerry replied. He wished to avoid an encounter with the engineers if possible; difficult questions might well be asked.

"Give me the torch," Garvey said, snatching it from Jerry's hand. He scanned the opposite side of the pool with the beam. It lit a series of dressing rooms, and an open door that led out of the pool. Nothing moved. "I don't like vermin-" Garvey said.

"The place has been neglected," Jerry replied.

"- especially the human variety." Garvey thrust the torch back into Jerry's hands. "I've got enemies, Mr. Coloqhoun. But then you've done your researches on me, haven't you? You know I'm no lily-white." Garvey's concern about the noises he thought he'd heard now made unpalatable sense. It wasn't rats he was afraid of, but grievous bodily harm. "I think I should be going," he said. "Show me the other pool and we'll be away."

"Surely." Jerry was as happy to be going as his guest. The incident had raised his temperature. The sweat came profusely now, trickling down the back of his neck. His sinuses ached. He led Garvey across the hallway to the door of the larger pool and pulled. The door refused him.

"Problem?"

"It must be locked from the inside."

"Is there another way in?"

"I think so. Do you want me to go round the back?"

Garvey glanced at his watch. "Two minutes," he said. "I've got appointments."

Garvey watched Coloqhoun disappear down the darkened corridor, the torchlight running on ahead of him. He didn't like the man. He was too closely shaven; and his shoes were Italian. But – the proposer aside – the project had some merit. Garvey liked the Pools and their adjuncts, the uniformity of their design, the banality of their decorations. Unlike many, he found institutions reassuring: hospitals, schools, even prisons. They smacked of social order, they soothed that part of him fearful of chaos. Better a world too organized than one not organized enough. Again, his cigar had gone out. He put it between his teeth and lit a match. As the first flare died, he caught an inkling sight of a naked girl in the corridor ahead, watching him. The glimpse was momentary, but when the match dropped from his fingers and the light failed, she appeared in his mind's eye, perfectly remembered. She was young – fifteen at the most – and her body full. The sweat on her skin lent her such sensuality she might have stepped from his dream-life. Dropping his stale cigar, he rummaged for another match and struck it, but in the meagre seconds of darkness the child-beauty had gone, leaving only the trace of her sweet body scent on the air.

"Girl?" he said.

The sight of her nudity, and the shock in her eyes, made him eager for her.

"Girl?"

The flame of the second match failed to penetrate more than a yard or two down the corridor.

"Are you there?"

She could not be far, he reasoned. Lighting a third match, he went in search of her. He had gone a few steps only when he heard somebody behind him. He turned. Torchlight lit the fright on his face. It was only the Italian Shoes. "There's no way in."

"There's no need to blind me," Garvey said. The beam dropped.

"I'm sorry."

"There's somebody here, Coloqhoun. A girl."

"A girl?"

"You know something about it maybe?"

"No."

"She was stark naked. Standing three or four yards from me."

Jerry looked at Garvey, mystified. Was the man suffering from sexual delusions?

"I tell you I saw a girl," Garvey protested, though no word of contradiction had been offered. "If you hadn't arrived I'd have had my hands on her." He glanced back down the corridor. "Get some light down there." Jerry trained the beam on the maze. There was no sign of life.

"Damn," said Garvey, his regret quite genuine. He looked back at Jerry. "All tight," he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"I'm interested," he said, as they parted on the step. "The project has potential. Do you have a ground-plan of the place?"

"No, but I can get my hands on one."

"Do that." Garvey was lighting a fresh cigar. "And send me your proposals in more detail. Then we'll talk again."

It took a considerable bribe to get the plans of the Pools out of his contact at the Architects' Department, but Jerry eventually secured them. On paper the complex looked like a labyrinth. And, like the best labyrinths, there was no order apparent in the layout of shower-rooms and bathrooms and changing-rooms. It was Carole who proved that thesis wrong.

"What is this?" she asked him as he pored over the plans that evening. They'd had four or five hours together at his flat – hours without the bickering and the bad feeling that had soured their time together of late. "It's the ground-plan of the swimming pools on Leopold Road. Do you want another brandy?" "No thanks." She peered at the plan while he got up to re-fill his glass.

"I think I've got Garvey in on the deal."

"You're going to do business with him, are you?"

"Don't make me sound like a white slaver. The man's got money."

"Dirty money."

"What's a little dirt between friends?"

She looked at him frostily, and he wished he could have played back the previous ten seconds and erased the comment.

"I need this project," he said, taking his drink across to the sofa and sitting opposite her, the ground-plan spread on the low table between them. "I need something to go right for me for once."

Her eyes refused to grant him a reprieve.

"I just think Garvey and his like are bad news," she said. "I don't care how much money he's got. He's a villain, Jerry."

"So I should give the whole thing up, should I? Is that what you're saying?" They'd had this argument, in one guise or another, several times in the last few weeks. "I should just forget all the hard labour I've put in, and add this failure to all the others?"

"There's no need to shout."

"I'm not shouting!"

She shrugged. "All tight," she said quietly, "you're not shouting."

"Christ!"

She went back to perusing the ground-plan. He watched her from over the rim of his whisky tumbler; at the parting down the middle of her head, and the fine blonde hair that divided from there. They made so little sense to each other, he thought. The processes that brought them to their present impasse were perfectly obvious, yet time and again they failed to find the common ground necessary for a fruitful exchange of views. Not simply on this matter, on half a hundred others. Whatever thoughts buzzed beneath her tender scalp, they were a mystery to him. And his to her, presumably.

"It's a spiral," she said.

"What is?"

"The pool. It's designed like a spiral. Look."

He stood up to get a bird's eye view of the ground-plan as she traced a route through the passageways with her index finger. She was right. Though the imperatives of the architects' brief had muddied the clarity of the image, there was indeed a rough spiral built into the maze of corridors and rooms. Her circling fingers drew tighter and yet tighter loops as it described the shape. At last it came to rest on the large pool; the locked pool. He stared at the plan in silence. Without her pointing it out he knew he could have looked at the design for a week and never seen the underlying structure.

Carole decided she would not stay the night. It was not, she tried to explain at the door, that things between them were over; only that she valued their intimacy too much to misuse it as bandaging. He half-grasped the point; she too pictured them as wounded animals. At least they had some metaphorical life in common.

He was not unused to sleeping alone. In many ways he preferred to be solitary in his bed than to share it with someone, even Carole. But tonight he wanted her with him; not her, even, but somebody. He felt sourcelessly fretful, like a child. When sleep came it fled again, as if in fear of dreams.

Some time towards dawn he got up, preferring wakefulness to that wretched sleep-hopping, wrapped his dressing gown around his shivering body, and went through to brew himself some tea. The ground-plan was still spread on the coffee-table where they had left it

from the night before. Sipping the warm sweet Assam, he stood and pondered over it. Now that Carole had pointed it out, all he could concentrate upon – despite the clutter of marginalia that demanded his attention – was the spiral, that undisputable evidence of a hidden band at work beneath the apparent chaos of the maze. It seized his eye and seduced it into following its unremitting route, round and round, tighter and tighter; and towards what?: a locked swimming pool.

Tea drunk, he returned to bed; this time, fatigue got the better of his nerves and the sleep he'd been denied washed over him. He was woken at seven-fifteen by Carole, who was phoning before she went to work to apologize for the previous night.

"I don't want everything to go wrong between us, Jerry. You do know that, don't you? You know you're precious to me."

He couldn't take love-talk in the morning. What seemed romantic at midnight struck him as ridiculous at dawn. He answered her declarations of commitment as best he could, and made an arrangement to see her the following evening. Then he returned to his pillow.

Scarcely a quarter hour had passed since he'd visited the Pools without Ezra Garvey thinking of the girl he'd glimpsed in the corridor. Her face had come back to him during dinner with his wife and sex with his mistress. So untrammelled, that face, so bright with possibilities.

Garvey thought of himself as a woman's man. Unlike most of his fellow potentates, whose consorts were a convenience best paid to be absent when not required for some specific function, Garvey enjoyed the company of the opposite sex. Their voices, their perfume, their laughter. His greed for their proximity knew few bounds; they were precious creatures whose company he was willing to spend small fortunes to secure. His jacket was therefore weighed down with money and expensive trinkets when he returned, that morning, to Leopold Road. The pedestrians on the street were too concerned to keep their heads dry (a cold and steady drizzle had fallen since dawn) to notice the man on the step standing under a black umbrella while another bent to the business of undoing the padlock. Chandaman was an expert with locks. The shackle snapped open within seconds. Garvey lowered his umbrella and slipped into the vestibule.

"Wait here," he instructed Chandaman. "And close the door."

"Yes, sir."

"If I need you, I'll shout. You got the torch?"

Chandaman produced the torch from his jacket. Garvey took it, switched it on, and disappeared down the corridor. Either it was substantially colder outside than it had been the day before yesterday, or else the interior was hot. He unbuttoned his jacket, and loosened his tightly-knotted tie. He welcomed the heat, reminding him as it did of the sheen on the dream-girl's skin, of the heat-languored look in her dark eyes. He advanced down the corridor, the torch-light splashing off the tiles. His sense of direction had always been good; it took him a short time only to find his way to the spot outside the large pool where he had encountered the girl. There he stood still, and listened. Garvey was a man used to looking over his shoulder. All his professional life, whether in or out of prison, he had needed to watch for the assassin at his back. Such ceaseless vigilance had made him sensitive to the least sign of human presence. Sounds another man might have ignored played a warning tattoo upon his eardrum. But here?; nothing. Silence in the corridors; silence in the sweating ante-rooms and the Turkish baths; silence in every tiled enclave from one end of the building to the other. And yet he knew he was not alone. When five senses failed him a sixth – belonging, perhaps, more to the beast in him than the sophisticate his expensive suit spoke of- sensed presences. This faculty had saved his hide more than once. Now, he hoped, it would guide him into the arms of beauty.

Trusting to instinct, he extinguished the torch and headed off down the corridor from which the girl had first emerged, feeling his way along the walls. His quarry's presence tantalized him. He suspected she was a mere wall away, keeping pace with him along some secret passage he had no access to. The thought of this stalking pleased him. She and he, alone in this sweating maze, playing a game that both knew must end in capture. He moved stealthily, his pulse ticking off the seconds of the chase at neck and wrist and groin. His crucifix was glued to his breast-bone with perspiration.

At last, the corridor divided. He halted. There was precious little light: what there was etched the tunnels deceptively. Impossible to judge distance. But trusting to his instinct, he turned left and followed his nose. Almost immediately, a door. It was open, and he walked through into a larger space; or so he guessed from the muted sound of his footsteps. Again, he stood still. This time, his straining ears were rewarded with a sound. Across the room from him, the soft pad of naked feet on the tiles. Was it his imagination, or did he even glimpse

the girl, her body carved from the gloom, paler than the surrounding darkness, and smoother? Yes!; it was she. He almost called out after her, and then thought better of it. Instead he went in silent pursuit, content to play her game for as long as it pleased her. Crossing the room, he stepped through another door which let on to a further tunnel. The air here was much warmer than anywhere else in the building, clammy and ingratiating as it pressed itself upon him. A moment's anxiety caught his throat: that he was neglecting every article of an autocrat's faith, putting his head so willingly into this warm noose. It could so easily be a set-up: the girl, the chase. Around the next corner the breasts and the beauty might have gone, and there would be a knife at his heart. And yet he knew this wasn't so; knew that the footfall ahead was a woman's, light and lithe; that the swelter that brought new tides of sweat from him could nurture only softness and passivity here. No knife could prosper in such heat: its edge would soften, its ambition go neglected. He was safe.

Ahead, the footsteps had halted. He halted too. There was light from somewhere, though its source was not apparent. He licked his lips, tasting salt, then advanced. Beneath his fingers the tiles were glossed with water; under his heels, they were slick. Anticipation mounted in him with every step.

Now the light was brightening. It was not day. Sunlight had no route into this sanctum; this was more like moonlight – soft-edged, evasive – though that too must be exiled here, he thought. Whatever its origins, by it he finally set eyes on the girl; or rather, on a girl, for it was not the same he had seen two days previous. Naked she was, young she was; but in all other respects different. He caught a glance from her before she fled from him down the corridor, and turned a corner. Puzzlement now lent piquancy to the chase: not one but two girls, occupying this secret place; why? He looked behind him, to be certain his escape route lay open should he wish to retreat, but his memory, befuddled by the scented air, refused a clear picture of the way he'd come. A twinge of concern checked his exhilaration, but he refused to succumb to it, and pressed on, following the girl to the end of the corridor and turning left after her. The passageway ran for a short way before making another left; the girl even now disappearing around that corner. Dimly aware that these gyrations were becoming tighter as he turned upon himself and upon himself again, he went where she led, panting now with the breath-quenching air and the insistence of the chase.

Suddenly, as he turned one final corner, the heat became smotheringly close, and the passageway delivered him out into a

small, dimly-lit chamber. He unbuttoned the top of his shirt; the veins on the back of his hands stood out like cord; he was aware of how his heart and lungs were labouring. But, he was relieved to see, the chase finished here. The object of his pursuit was standing with her back to him across the chamber, and at the sight of her smooth back and exquisite buttocks his claustrophobia evaporated.

"Girl…," he panted. "You led me quite a chase."

She seemed not to hear him, or, more likely, was extending the game to its limits out of waywardness. He started across the slippery tiles towards her.

"I'm talking to you."

As he came within half a dozen feet of her, she turned. It was not the girl he had just pursued through the corridor, nor indeed the one he had seen two days previous. This creature was another altogether. His gaze rested on her unfamiliar face a few seconds only, however, before sliding giddily down to meet the child she held in her arms. It was suckling like any new-born babe, pulling at her young breast with no little hunger. But in his four and a half decades of life Garvey's eyes bad never seen a creature its like. Nausea rose in him. To see the girl giving suck was surprise enough, but to such a thing, such an outcast of any tribe, human or animal, was almost more than his stomach could stand. Hell itself had offspring more embraceable.

"What in Christ's name-“ The girl stared at Garvey's alarm, and a wave of laughter broke over her face. He shook his head. The child in her arms uncurled a suckered limb and clamped it to its comforter's bosom so as to get better purchase. The gesture lashed Garvey's disgust into rage. Ignoring the girl's protests he snatched the abomination from her arms, holding it long enough to feel the glistening sac of its body squirm in his grasp, then flung it as hard as he could against the far wall of the chamber. As it struck the tiles it cried out, its complaint ending almost as soon as it began, only to be taken~ up instantly by the mother. She ran across the room to where the child lay, its apparently boneless body split open by the impact. One of its limbs, of which it possessed at least half a dozen, attempted to reach up to touch her sobbing face. She gathered the thing up into her arms; threads of shiny fluid ran across her belly and into her groin. Out beyond the chamber something gave voice. Garvey had no doubt of its cue; it was answering the death-cry of the child, and the rising wail of its mother – but this sound was more distressing than either. Garvey's imagination was an impoverished faculty. Beyond his

dreams of wealth and women lay a wasteland. Yet now, at the sound of that voice, the wasteland bloomed, and gave forth horrors he'd believed himself incapable of conceiving. Not portraits of monsters, which, at the best, could be no more than assemblies of experienced phenomena. What his mind created was more feeling than sight; belonged to his marrow not to his mind. All certainty trembled masculinity, power; the twin imperatives of dread and reason – all turned their collars up and denied knowledge of him. He shook, afraid as only dreams made him afraid, while the cry went on and on, then he turned his back on the chamber, and ran, the light throwing his shadow in front of him down the dim corridor.

His sense of direction had deserted him. At the first intersection, and then at the second, he made an error. A few yards on he realized his mistake and tried to double back, but merely exacerbated the confusion. The corridors all looked alike: the same tiles, the same half-light, each fresh corner he turned either led him into a chamber he had not passed through or complete cul-de-sacs. His panic spiraled. The wailing had now ceased; he was alone with his rasping breath and half-spoken curses. Coloqhoun was responsible for this torment, and Garvey swore he would have its purpose beaten out of the man even if he had to break every bone in Coloqhoun's body personally. He clung to thoughts of that beating as he ran on; it was his only comfort. Indeed so preoccupied did he become with thought of the agonies he'd make Coloqhoun suffer he failed to realize that he had traced his way round in a circle and was running back towards the light until his sliding heels delivered him into a familiar chamber. The child lay on the floor, dead and discarded. Its mother was nowhere to be seen.

Garvey halted, and took stock of his situation. If he went back the way he'd come the route would only confound him again; if he went ahead, through the chamber and towards the light, he might cut the Gordian knot and be delivered back to his starting point. The swift wit of the solution pleased him. Cautiously, he crossed the chamber to the door on the other side and peered through. Another short corridor presented itself, and beyond that a door that let on to an open space. The pool! Surely the pool!

He threw caution to the wind, and moved out of the chamber and along the passage.

With every step he took, the heat intensified. His head thumped with it. He pressed on to the end of the passageway, and out into the arena beyond.

The large pool had not been drained, unlike the smaller. Rather, it was full almost to brimming – not with clear water, but with a scummy broth that steamed even in the heat of the interior. This was the source of the light. The water in the pool gave off a phosphorescence that tinged everything – the tiles, the diving board, the changing rooms, (himself, no doubt) with the same fulvous wash.

He scanned the scene in front of him. There was no sign of the women. His route to the exit lay unchallenged; nor could he see sign of padlock or chains on the double-doors. He began towards them. His heel slid on the tiles, and he glanced down briefly to see that he had crossed a trail of fluid – difficult, in the bewitched light, to make out its colour – that either ended at the water's edge, or began there.

He looked back towards the water, curiosity getting the better of him. The steam swirled; an eddy toyed with the scum. And there! His eye caught sight of a dark, anonymous shape sliding beneath the skin of the water. He thought of the creature he'd killed; of its formless body and the dangling loops of its limbs. Was this another of that species? The liquid brightness lapped against the poolside at his feet; continents of scum broke into archipelagoes. Of the swimmer, there was no sign.

Irritated, he looked away from the water. He was no longer alone. Three girls had appeared from somewhere, and were moving down the edge of the pool towards him. One he recognized as the girl he had first seen here. She was wearing a dress, unlike her sisters. One of her breasts was bared. She looked at him gravely, as she approached; by her side she trailed a rope, decorated along its length with stained ribbons tied in limp but extravagant bows. At the arrival of these three graces the fermenting waters of the pool were stirred into a frenzy, as its occupants rose to meet the women. Garvey could see three or four restless forms teasing – but not breaking – the surface. He was caught between his instinct to take flight (the rope, though prettifled, was still a rope) and the desire to linger and see what the pool contained. He glanced towards the door. He was within ten yards of it. A quick dash and he'd be out into the cool air of the corridor. From there, Chandaman was within bailing distance.

The girls stood a few feet from him, and watched him. He returned their looks. All the desires that had brought him here had taken heel. He no longer wanted to cup the breasts of these creatures, or dabble at the intersection of their gleaming thighs. These women were not what they seemed. Their quietness wasn't docility, but a drug-trance; their nakedness wasn't sensuality, but a horrid indifference which offended

him. Even their youth, and all it brought – the softness of their skins, the gloss of their hair – even that was somehow corrupt. When the girl in the dress reached out and touched his sweating face, Garvey made a small cry of disgust, as if he'd been licked by a snake. She was not fazed by his response, but stepped closer to him still, her eyes fixed on his, smelling not of perfume like his mistress, but of fleshliness. Affronted as he was, he could not turn away. He stood, meeting the slut's eyes, as she kissed his cheek, and the beribboned rope was wrapped around his neck.

Jerry called Garvey's office at half-hourly intervals through the day. At first he was told that the man was out of the office, and would be available later that afternoon. As the day wore on, however, the message changed. Garvey was not going to be in the office at all that day, Jerry was informed. Mr. Garvey is feeling unwell, the secretary told him; he has gone home to rest. Please call again tomorrow. Jerry left with her the message that he had secured the ground plan to the Pools and would be delighted to meet and discuss their plans at Mr. Garvey's convenience. Carole called in the late afternoon.

"Shall we go out tonight?" she said. "Maybe a film?"

"What do you want to see?" he said.

"Oh, I hadn't really thought that far. We'll talk about it this evening, shall we?"

They ended up going to a French movie, which seemed, as far as Jerry could grasp, completely lacking in plot; it was simply a series of dialogues between characters, discussing their traumas and their aspirations, the former being in direct proportion to the failure of the latter. It left him feeling torpid.

"You didn't like it…"

"Not much. All that brow-beating."

"And no shoot-out."

"No shoot-out."

She smiled to herself.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing…"

"Don't say nothing."

She shrugged. “I was just smiling, that's all. Can't I smile?"

"Jesus. All this conversation needs is sub-titles."

They walked along Oxford Street a little way.

"Do you want to eat?" he said, as they came to the head of Poland Street. "We could go to the Red Fort." "No thanks. I hate eating late."

"For Christ's sake, let's not argue about a bloody film."

"Who's arguing?"

"You're so infuriating-”

"That's something we've got in common, anyhow," she returned. Her neck was flushed.

"You said this morning -”

"What?"

"About us not losing each other-”

"That was this morning," she said, eyes steely. And then, suddenly: "You don't give a fuck, Jerry. Not about me, not about anybody."

She stared at him, almost defying him not to respond. When he failed to, she seemed curiously satisfied. "Goodnight…" she said, and began to walk away from him. He watched her take five, six, seven steps from him, the deepest part of him wanting to call after her, but a dozen irrelevancies – pride, fatigue, inconvenience – blocking his doing so. What eventually uprooted him, and put her name on his lips, was the thought of an empty bed tonight; of the sheets warm only where he lay, and chilly as Hell to left and right of him.

"Carole."

She didn't turn; her step didn't even falter. He had to trot to catch up with her, conscious that this scene was probably entertaining the passers-by.

"Carole." He caught hold of her arm. Now she stopped. When he moved round to face her he was shocked to see that she was crying. This discomfited him; he hated her tears only marginally less than his

own.

"I surrender," he said, trying a smile. "The film was a masterpiece.

How's that?"

She refused to be soothed by his antics; her face was swollen with unhappiness.

"Don't," he said. "Please don't. I'm not…" (very good at apologies, he wanted to say, but he was so bad at them he couldn't even manage that much.)

"Never mind," she said softly. She wasn't angry, he saw; only miserable.

"Come back to the flat."

"I don't want to."

"I want you to," he replied. That at least was sincerely meant. "I don't like talking in the street." He hailed a cab, and they made their way back to Kentish Town, keeping their silence. Half way up the stairs to the door of the flat Carole said: "Foul perfume."

There was a strong, acidic smell lingering on the stairs.

"Somebody's been up here," he said, suddenly anxious, and hurried on up the flight to the front door of his flat. It was open; the lock had been unceremoniously forced, the wood of the door-jamb splinted. He cursed. "What's wrong?" Carole asked, following him up the stairs.

"Break in."

He stepped into the flat and switched on the light. The interior was chaos. The whole flat had been comprehensively trashed. Everywhere, petty acts of vandalism – pictures smashed, pillows de-gutted, furniture reduced to timber. He stood in the middle of the turmoil and shook, while Carole went from room to room, finding the same thorough destruction in each.

"This is personal, Jerry."

He nodded.

"I'll call the police," she volunteered. "You find out what's missing."

He did as he was told, white-faced. The blow of this invasion numbed him. As he walked listlessly through the flat to survey the pandemonium – turning broken items over, pushing drawers back into place – he found himself imagining the intruders about their business, laughing as they worked through his clothes and keepsakes. In the corner of his bedroom he found a heap of his photographs.

They had urinated on them.

"The police are on their way," Carole told him. "They said not to touch anything."

Too late," he murmured.

"What's missing?"

Nothing," he told her. All the valuables – the stereo and video equipment, his credit cards, his few items of jewellery – were present.

Only then did he remember the ground-plan. He returned to the living-room and proceeded to root through the wreckage, but he knew damn well he wasn't going to find it.

"Garvey," he said.

"What about him?"

"He came for the ground-plan of the Pools. Or sent someone."

"Why?" Carole replied, looking at the chaos. "You were going to give it to him anyway."

Jerry shook his head. "You were the one who warned me to stay clear -"

"I never expected something like this."

"That makes two of us."

The police came and went, offering faint apologies for the fact that they thought an arrest unlikely. "There's a lot of vandalism around at the moment," the officer said. "There's nobody in downstairs…"

"No. They're away."

"Last hope, I'm afraid. We're getting calls like this all the time. You're insured?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's something."

Throughout the interview Jerry kept silent on his suspicions, though he was repeatedly tempted to point the finger. There was little purpose in accusing Garvey at this juncture. For one, Garvey would have alibis prepared; for another, what would unsubstantiated accusations do but inflame the man's unreason further?

"What will you do?" Carole asked him, when the police picked up their shrugs and walked.

"I don't know. I can't even be certain it was Garvey. One minute he's all sweetness and light; the next this. How do I deal with a mind like that?"

"You don't. You leave it well be," she replied. "Do you want to stay here, or go over to my place?" "Stay," he said.

They made a perfunctory attempt to restore the status quo -righting the furniture that was not too crippled to stand, and clearing up the broken glass. Then they turned the slashed mattress over, located two unmutilated cushions, and went to bed.

She wanted to make love, but that reassurance, like so much of his life of late, was doomed to failure. There was no making good between the sheets what had been so badly soured out of them. His anger made him rough, and his roughness in turn angered her. She frowned beneath him, her kisses unwilling and tight. Her reluctance only spumed him on to fresh crassness.

"Stop," she said, as he was about to enter her. "I don't want this."

He did; and badly. He pushed before she could further her objections.

"I said don't, Jerry."

He shut out her voice. He was half as heavy again as she.

"Stop."

He closed his eyes. She told him again to stop, this time with real fury, but he just thrust harder – the way she'd ask him to sometimes, when the heat was really on – beg him to, even. But now she only

swore at him, and threatened, and every word she said made him more intent not to be cheated of this, though he felt nothing at this groin but fullness and discomfort, and the urge to be rid.

She began to fight, raking at his back with her nails, and pulling at his hair to unclamp his face from her neck. It passed through his head as he laboured that she would hate him for this, and on that, at least, they would be of one accord, but the thought was soon lost to sensation.

The poison passed, he rolled off her.

"Bastard…" she said.

His back stung. When he got up from the bed he left blood on the sheets. Digging through the chaos in the living room he located an unbroken bottle of whisky. The glasses, however, were all smashed, and out of absurd fastidiousness he didn't want to drink from the bottle. He squatted against the wall, his back chilled, feeling neither wretched nor proud. The front door opened, and was slammed. He waited, listening to Carole's feet on the stairs. Then tears came, though these too he felt utterly detached from. Finally, the bout dispatched, he went through into the kitchen, found a cup, and drank himself senseless out of that.

Garvey's study was an impressive room; he'd had it fashioned after that of a tax lawyer he'd known, the walls lined with books purchased by the yard, the colour of carpet and paintwork alike muted, as though by an accrual of cigar smoke and learning. When he found sleep difficult, as he did now, he could retire to the study, sit on his leather backed chair behind a vast desk, and dream of legitimacy. Not tonight, however; tonight his thoughts were otherwise preoccupied. Always, however much he might try to turn to another route, they went back to Leopold Road. He remembered little of what had happened at the Pools. That in itself was distressing; he had always prided himself upon the acuteness of his memory. Indeed his recall of faces seen and favours done had ID no small measure helped him to his present power. Of the hundreds in his employ he boasted that there was not a door-keeper or a cleaner he could not address by their Christian name. * * *

But of the events at Leopold Road, barely thirty-six hours old, he had only the vaguest recollection; of the women closing upon him, and the rope tightening around his neck; of their leading him along the lip of the pool to some chamber the vileness of which had

practically snatched his senses away. What had followed his arrival there moved in his memory like those forms in the filth of the pool: obscure, but horribly distressing. There had been humiliation and horrors, hadn't there? Beyond that, he remembered nothing.

He was not a man to kowtow to such ambiguities without argument, however. If there were mysteries to be uncovered here, then he would do so, and take the consequence of revelation. His first offensive had been sending Chandaman and Fryer to turn Coloqhoun's place over. If, as he suspected, this whole enterprise was some elaborate trap devised by his enemies, then Coloqhoun was involved in its setting. No more than a front man, no doubt; certainly not the mastermind. But Garvey was satisfied that the destruction of Coloqhoun's goods and chattels would warn his masters of his intent to fight. It had born other fruit too. Chandaman had returned with the ground-plan of the Pools; they were spread on Garvey's desk now. He had traced his route through the complex time and again, hoping that his memory might be jogged. He had been disappointed.

Weary, he got up and went to the study window. The garden behind the house was vast, and severely schooled. He could see little of the immaculate borders at the moment however; the starlight barely described the world outside. All he could see was his own reflection in the polished pane.

As he focused on it, his outline seemed to waver, and he felt a loosening in his lower belly, as if something had come unknotted there. He put his hand to his abdomen. It twitched, it trembled, and for an instant he was back in the Pools, and naked, and something lumpen moved in front of his eyes. He almost yelled, but stopped himself by turning away from the window and staring at the room; at the carpets and the books and the furniture; at sober, solid reality. Even then the images refused to leave his head entirely. The coils of his innards were still jittery. It was several minutes before he could bring himself to look back at the reflection in the window. When at last he did all trace of the vacillation had disappeared. He would countenance no more nights like this, sleepless and haunted. With the first light of dawn came the conviction that today was the day to break Mr. Coloqhoun.

Jerry tried to call Carole at her office that morning. She was repeatedly unavailable. Eventually he simply gave up trying, and turned his attentions to the Herculean task of restoring some order to the flat. He lacked the focus and the energy to do a good job however. After a futile hour, in which he seemed not to have made more than a

dent in the problem, he gave up. The chaos accurately reflected his opinion of himself. Best perhaps that it be left to lie. Just before noon, he received a call.

"Mr. Coloqhoun? Mr. Gerard Coloqhoun?"

"That's right."

"My name's Fryer. I'm calling on behalf of Mr. Garvey -”

"Oh?"

Was this to gloat, or threaten further mischief?

"Mr. Garvey was expecting some proposals from you," Fryer said.

"Proposals?"

"He's very enthusiastic about the Leopold Road project, Mr. Coloqhoun. He feels there's substantial monies to be made."

Jerry said nothing; this palaver confounded him.

"Mr. Garvey would like another meeting, as soon as possible."

"Yes?"

"At the Pools. There's a few architectural details he'd like to show his colleagues."

"I see."

"Would you be available later on today?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Four-thirty?"

The conversation more or less ended there, leaving Jerry mystified. There had been no trace of enmity in Fryer's manner; no hint, however subtle, of bad blood between the two parties. Perhaps, as the police had suggested, the events of the previous night had been the work of anonymous vandals – the theft of the ground-plan a whim of those responsible. His depressed spirits rose. All was not lost.

He rang Carole again, buoyed up by this turn of events. This time did not take the repeated excuses of her colleagues, but insisted on

speaking to her. Finally, she picked up the phone.

"I don't want to talk to you, Jerry. Just go to hell."

"Just hear me out -”

She slammed the receiver down before he said another word. He rang back again, immediately. When she answered, and heard his voice, she seemed baffled that he was so eager to make amends.

"Why are you even trying?" she said. "Jesus Christ, what's the use?" H e could hear the tears in her throat. "I want you to understand how sick I feel. Let me make it right. Please let me make it right."

She didn't reply to his appeal.

"Don't put the phone down. Please don't. I know it was unforgivable. Jesus, I know…"

Still, she kept her silence.

"Just think about it, will you? Give me a chance to put things right. Will you do that?"

Very quietly, she said: "I don't see the use."

"May I call you tomorrow?"

He heard her sigh.

"May I?"

"Yes. Yes."

The line went dead.

He set out for his meeting at Leopold Road with a full three-quarters of an hour to spare, but half way to his destination the rain came on, great spots of it which defied the best efforts of his windscreen wipers. The traffic slowed; he crawled for half a mile, with only the brake-lights of the vehicle ahead visible through the deluge. The minutes ticked by, and his anxiety mounted. By the time he edged his way out of the fouled-up traffic to find another route, he was already late. There was nobody waiting on the steps of the Pools; but Garvey's powder-blue Rover was parked a little way down the road. There was no sign of the chauffeur. Jerry found a place to park on the opposite side of the road, and crossed through the rain. It was a matter of fifty

yards from the door of the car to that of the Pools but by the time he reached the soothe was drenched and breathless. The door was open. Garvey had clearly manipulated the lock and slipped out of the downpour. Jerry ducked inside.

Garvey was not in the vestibule, but somebody was. A man of Jerry's height, but with half the width again. He was wearing leather gloves. His face, but for the absence of seams, might have been of the same material. "Coloqhoun?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Garvey is waiting for you inside."

"Who are you?"

"Chandaman," the man replied. "Go right in."

There was a light at the far end of the corridor. Jerry pushed open the glass-paneled vestibule doors and walked down towards it.

Behind him, he heard the front door snap closed, and then the echoing tread of Garvey's lieutenant. Garvey was talking with another man, shorter than Chandaman, who was holding a sizeable torch. When the pair heard Jerry approach they looked his way; their conversation abruptly ceased. Garvey offered no welcoming comment or hand, but merely said: "About time."

"The rain…" Jerry began, then thought better of offering a self-evident explanation.

"You'll catch your death," the man with the torch said. Jerry immediately recognized the dulcet tones of: "Fryer."

"The same," the man returned.

"Pleased to meet you."

They shook hands, and as they did so Jerry caught sight of Garvey, who was staring at him as though in search of a second head. The man didn't say anything for what seemed like half a minute, but simply studied the growing discomfort on Jerry's face.

"I'm not a stupid man," Garvey said, eventually.

The statement, coming out of nowhere, begged response.

"I don't even believe you're the main man in all of this," Garvey went on. "I'm prepared to be charitable." "What's this about?"

"Charitable -" Garvey repeated,"- because I think you're out of your depth. Isn't that tight?"

Jerry just frowned.

"I think that's tight," Fryer replied.

"I don't think you understand how much trouble you're in even now, do you?" Garvey said.

Jerry was suddenly uncomfortably aware of Chandaman standing behind him, and of his own utter vulnerability. "But I don't think ignorance should ever be bliss," Garvey was saying. "I mean, even if you don't understand, that doesn't make you exempt, does it?"

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about," Jerry protested mildly. Garvey's face, by the light of the torch, was drawn and pale; he looked in need of a holiday.

"This place," Garvey returned. "I'm talking about this place. The women you put in here… for my benefit. What's it all about, Coloqhoun? That's all I want to know. What's it all about?"

Jerry shrugged lightly. Each word Garvey uttered merely perplexed him more; but the man had already told him ignorance would not be considered a legitimate excuse. Perhaps a question was the wisest reply. "You saw women here?" he said.

Whores, more like," Garvey responded. His breath smelt of last week's cigar ash. "Who are you working for, Coloqhoun?"

"For myself. The deal I offered-"

"Forget your fucking deal," Garvey said. "I'm not interested in deals."

"I see," Jerry replied. "Then I don't see any point in this conversation." He took a half-step away from Garvey, but the man's arm shot out and caught hold of his rain-sodden coat.

"I didn't tell you to go," Garvey said.

"I've got business "Then it'll have to wait," the other replied, scarcely relaxing his grip. Jerry knew that if he tried to shrug off Garvey and make a dash for the front door he'd be stopped by Chandaman before

he made three paces; if, on the other hand, he didn't try to escape "I don't much like your sort," Garvey said, removing his hand. "Smart brats with an eye to the main chance. Think you're so damn clever, just because you've got a fancy accent and a silk tie. Let me tell you something -" He jabbed his finger at Jerry's throat,"- I don't give a shit about you. I just want to know who you work for. Understand?" "I already told you-"

"Who do you work for?" Garvey insisted, punctuating each word with a fresh jab. "Or you're going to feel very sick."

"For Christ's sake – I'm not working for anybody. And I don't know anything about any women." "Don't make it worse than it already is," Fryer advised, with feigned concern.

"I'm telling the truth."

"I think the man wants to be hurt," Fryer said. Chandaman gave a joyless laugh. "Is that what you want?" "Just name some names," Garvey said. "Or we're going to break your legs." The threat, unequivocal as it was, did nothing for Jerry's clarity of mind. He could think of no way out of this but to continue to insist upon his innocence. If he named some fictitious overlord the lie would be uncovered in moments, and the consequences could only be worse for the attempted deception.

"Check my credentials," he pleaded. "You've got the resources. Dig around. I'm not a company man, Garvey; I never have been."

Garvey's eye left Jerry's face for a moment and moved to his shoulder. Jerry grasped the significance of the sign a heartbeat too late to prepare himself for the blow to his kidneys from the man at his back. He pitched forward, but before he could collide with Garvey, Chandaman had snatched at his collar and was throwing him against the wall. He doubled up, the pain blinding him to all other thoughts. Vaguely, he heard Garvey asking him again who his boss was. He shook his head. His skull was full of ball-bearings; they rattled between his ears.

"Jesus… Jesus…" he said, groping for some word of defence to keep another beating at bay, but he was hauled upright before any presented itself. The torch-beam was turned on him. He was ashamed of the tears that were rolling down his cheeks.

"Names," said Garvey.

The ball-bearings rattled on.

"Again," said Garvey, and Chandaman was moving in to give his fists further exercise. Garvey called him off as Jerry came close to passing out. The leather face withdrew.

"Stand up when I'm talking to you," Garvey said.

Jerry attempted to oblige, but his body was less than willing to comply. It trembled, it felt fit to die. "Stand up," Fryer reiterated, moving between Jerry and his tormentor to prod the point home. Now, in close proximity, Jerry smelt that acidic scent Carole had caught on the stairs: it was Fryer's cologne. "Stand up!" the man insisted.

Jerry raised a feeble hand to shield his face from the blinding beam. He could not see any of the trio's faces, but he was dimly aware that Fryer was blocking Chandaman's access to him. To Jerry's right, Garvey struck a match, and applied the flame to a cigar. A moment presented itself: Garvey occupied, the thug stymied. Jerry took it. Ducking down beneath the torch-beam he broke from his place against the wall, contriving to knock the torch from Fryer's hand as he did so. The light-source clattered across the tiles and went out.

In the sudden darkness, Jerry made a stumbling bid for freedom. Behind him, he heard Garvey curse; heard Chandaman and Fryer collide as they scrabbled for the fallen torch. He began to edge his way along the wall to the end of the corridor. There was evidently no safe route past his tormentors to the front door; his only hope lay in losing himself in the networks of corridors that lay ahead.

He reached a corner, and made a right, vaguely remembering that this led him off the main thoroughfares and into the service corridors. The beating that he'd taken, though interrupted before it could incapacitate, had rendered him breathless and bruised. He felt every step he took as a sharp pain in his lower abdomen and back. When he slipped on the slimy tiles, the impact almost made him cry out.

At his back, Garvey was shouting again. The torch had been located. Its light bounced down the labyrinth to find him. Jerry hurried on, glad of the murky illumination, but not of its source. They would follow, and quickly. If, as Carole had said, the place was a simple spiral, the corridors describing a relentless loop with no way out of the configuration, he was lost. But he was committed. Head giddied by the mounting heat, he moved on, praying to find a fire-exit that

would give him passage out of this trap.

"He went this way," Fryer said. "He must have done."

Garvey nodded; it was indeed the likeliest route for Coloqhoun to have taken. Away from the light and into the labyrinth.

"Shall we go after him?" Chandaman said. The man was fairly salivating to finish the beating he'd started. "He can't have got far."

"No," said Garvey. Nothing, not even the promise of the knighthood, would have induced him to follow. Fryer had already advanced down the passageway a few yards, shining the torch-beam on the glistening walls. "It's warm," he said.

Garvey knew all too well how warm it was. Such heat wasn't natural, not for England. This was a temperate isle; that was why he had never set foot off it. The sweltering heat of other continents bred grotesqueries he wanted no sight of.

"What do we do?" Chandaman demanded. "Wait for him to come out?"

Garvey pondered this. The smell from the corridor was beginning to distress him. His innards were churning, his skin was crawling. Instinctively, he put his hand to his groin. His manhood had shrunk in trepidation. "No," he said suddenly.

"No?"

We're not waiting."

"He can't stay in there forever."

"I said no!" He hadn't anticipated how profoundly the sweat of the place would upset him. Irritating as it was to let Coloqhoun slip away like this, he knew that if he stayed here much longer he risked losing his self-control. "You two can wait for him at his flat," he told Chandaman. "He'll have to come home sooner or later." "Damn shame," Fryer muttered as he emerged from the passageway. "I like a chase."

Perhaps they weren't following. It was several minutes now since Jerry had heard the voices behind him. His heart had stopped its furious pumping. Now, with the adrenalin no longer giving speed to his heels, and distracting his muscles from their bruising, his pace

slowed to a crawl. His body protested at even that.

When the agonies of taking another step became too much he slid down the wall and sat slumped across the passageway. His rain-drenched clothes clung to his body and about his throat; he felt both chilled and suffocated by them. He pulled at the knot of his tie, and then unbuttoned his waistcoat and his shirt. The air in the labyrinth was warm on his skin. Its touch was welcome.

He closed his eyes and made a studied attempt to mesmerise himself out of this pain. What was feeling but a trick of the nerve-endings?; there were techniques for dislocating the mind from the body, and leaving agonies behind. But no sooner had his lids closed than he heard muted sounds somewhere nearby. Footsteps; the lull of voices. It wasn't Garvey and his associates: the voices were female. Jerry raised his leaden head and opened his eyes. Either he had become used to the darkness in his few moments of meditation or else a light had crept into the passageway; it was surely the latter.

He got to his feet. His jacket was dead weight, and he sloughed it off, leaving it to lie where he'd been squatting. Then he started in the direction of the light. The heat seemed to have risen considerably in the last few minutes: it gave him mild hallucinations. The walls seemed to have forsaken verticality, the air to have traded transparency for a shimmering aurora.

He turned a corner. The light brightened. Another corner, and he was delivered into a small tiled chamber, the heat of which took his breath away. He gasped like a stranded fish, and peered across the chamber – the air thickening with every pulse-beat – at the door on the far side. The yellowish light through it was brighter still, but he could not summon the will to follow it a yard further; the heat here had defeated him. Sensing that he was within an ace of unconsciousness, he put his hand out to support himself, but his palm slid on the slick tiles, and he fell, landing on his side. He could not prevent a shout spilling from him.

Groaning his misery, be tucked his legs up close to his body, and lay where he'd fallen. If Garvey had heard his yell, and sent his lieutenants in pursuit, then so be it. He was past caring.

The sound of movement reached him from across the chamber. Raising his head an inch from the floor he opened his eyes to a slit. A naked girl had appeared in the doorway opposite, or so his reeling senses informed him. Her skin shone as if oiled; here and there, on her

breasts and thighs, were smudges of what might have been old blood. Not her blood, however. There was no wound to spoil her gleaming body.

The girl had begun to laugh at him, a light, easy laugh that made him feel foolish. Its musicality entranced him however, and he made an effort to get a better look at her. She had started to move across the chamber towards him, still laughing; and now he saw that there were others behind her. These were the women Garvey had babbled about; this the trap he had accused Jerry of setting.

"Who are you?" he murmured as the girl approached him. Her laughter faltered when she looked down at his pain contorted features.

He attempted to sit upright, but his arms were numb, and he slid back to the tiles again. The woman had not answered his inquiry, nor did she make any attempt to help him. She simply stared down at him as a pedestrian might at a drunk in the gutter, her face unreadable. Looking up at her, Jerry felt his tenuous grip on consciousness slipping. The heat, his pain, and now this sudden eruption of beauty was too much for him. The distant women were dispersing into darkness, the entire chamber folding up like a magician's box until the sublime creature in front of him claimed his attention utterly. And now, at her silent insistence, his mind's eye seemed to be plucked from his head, and suddenly he was speeding over her skin, her flesh a landscape, each pore a pit, each hair a pylon. He was hers, utterly. She drowned him in her eyes, and flayed him with her lashes; she rolled him across her abdomen, and down the soft channel of her spine. She took him between her buttocks, and then up into her heat, and out again just as he thought he must burn alive. The velocity exhilarated him. He was aware that his body, somewhere below, was hyper-ventilating in its terror; but his imagination – careless of breath – went willingly where she sent him, looping like a bird, until he was thrown, ragged and dizzy, back into the cup of his skull. Before he could apply the fragile tool of reason to the phenomena he had just experienced, his eyes fluttered closed and he passed out.

The body does not need the mind. It has procedures aplenty – lungs to be filled and emptied, blood to be pumped and food profited from – none of which require the authority of thought. Only when one or more of these procedures falters does the mind become aware of the intricacy of the mechanism it inhabits. Coloqhoun's faint lasted only a few minutes; but when he came to he was aware of his body as he had seldom been before: as a trap. Its fragility was a trap; its shape, its size, its very gender was a trap. And there was no flying out of it; he

was shackled to, or in, this wretchedness.

These thoughts came and went. In between them there were brief sights through which he fell giddily, and still briefer moments in which he glimpsed the world outside himself.

The women had picked him up. His head lolled; his hair dragged on the floor. I am a trophy, he thought in a more coherent instant, then the darkness came again. And again he struggled to the surface, and now they were carrying him along the edge of the large pool. His nostrils were filled with contradictory scents, both delectable and fetid. From the corner of his lazy eye he could see water so bright it seemed to burn as it lapped the shores of the pool: and something else too – shadows moving in the brightness.

They mean to drown me, he thought. And then: I'm already drowning. He imagined water filling his mouth: imagined the forms he had glimpsed in the pool invading his throat and slipping into his belly. He struggled to vomit them back up, his body convulsing.

A hand was laid on his face. The palm was blissfully cool. "Hush," somebody murmured to him, and at the words his delusions melted away. He felt himself coaxed out of his terrors and into consciousness.

The hand had evaporated from his brow. He looked around the gloomy room for his saviour, but his eyes didn't travel far. On the other side of this chamber – which looked to have been a communal shower-room – several pipes, set high in the wall, delivered solid arcs of water onto the tiles, where gutters channeled it away. A fine spray, and the gushing of the fountains, filled the air. Jerry sat up. There was movement behind the cascading veil of water: a shape too vast by far to be human. He peered through the drizzle to try and make sense of the folds of flesh. W as it an animal? There was a pungent smell in here that had something of the menagerie about it.

Moving with considerable caution so as not to arouse the beast's attention, Jerry attempted to stand up. His legs, however, were not the equal of his intention. All he could do was crawl a little way across the room on his hands and knees, and peer – one beast at another – through the veil.

He sensed that he was sensed; that the dark, recumbent creature had turned its eyes in his direction. Beneath its gaze, he felt his skin creep with gooseflesh, but he couldn't take his eyes off it. And then, as he squinted to scrutinize it better, a spark of phosphorescence began

in its substance, and spread – fluttering waves of jaundiced light up and across its tremendous form, revealing itself to Coloqhoun. Not it; she. He knew indisputably that this creature was female, though it resembled no species or genus he knew of. As the ripples of luminescence moved through the creature's physique, it revealed with every fresh pulsation some new and phenomenal configuration. Watching her, Jerry thought of something slow and molten – glass, perhaps; or stone – its flesh extruded into elaborate forms and recalled again into the furnace to be remade. She had neither head nor limbs recognizable as such, but her contours were ripe with clusters of bright bubbles that might have been eyes, and she threw out here and there iridescent ribbons – slow, pastel flames – that seemed momentarily to ignite the very air.

Now the body issued a series of soft noises: scuttlings and sighs. He wondered if he was being addressed, and if so, how he was expected to respond. Hearing footballs behind him, be glanced round at one of the women for guidance. "Don't be afraid," she said.

"I'm not," he replied. It was the truth. The prodigy in front of him was electrifying, but woke no fear in him. "What is she?" he asked.

The woman stood close to him. Her skin, bathed by the shimmering light off the creature, was golden. Despite the circumstances – or perhaps because of them – he felt a tremor of desire.

"She is the Madonna. The Virgin Mother."

Mother? Jerry mouthed, swiveling his head back to look at the creature again. The waves of phosphorescence had ceased to break across her body. Now the light pulsed in one part of her anatomy only, and at this region, in rhythm with the pulse, the Madonna's substance was swelling and splitting. Behind him he heard further footsteps; and now whispers echoed about the chamber, and chiming laughter, and applause.

The Madonna was giving birth. The swollen flesh was opening; liquid light gushing; the smell of smoke and blood filled the shower-room. A girl gave a cry, as if in sympathy with the Madonna. The applause mounted, and suddenly the slit spasmed and delivered the child – something between a squid and a shorn lamb – onto the tiles. The water from the pipes slapped it into consciousness immediately, and it threw back its head to look about it; its single eye vast and perfectly lucid. It squirmed on the tiles for a few moments before the girl at Jerry's side stepped forward into the veil of water and picked it

up. Its toothless mouth sought out her breast immediately. The girl delivered it to her tit.

"Not human…" Jerry murmured. He had not prepared himself for a child so strange, and yet so unequivocally intelligent. "Are all… all the children like that?"

The surrogate mother gazed down at the sac of life in her arms. "No one is like another," she replied. "We feed them. Some die. Others live, and go their ways."

"Where, for God's sake?"

"To the water. To the sea. Into dreams."

She cooed to it. A fluted limb, in which light ran as it had in its parent, paddled the air with pleasure. "And the father?"

"She needs no husband," the reply came. "She could make children from a shower of rain if she so desired." Jerry looked back at the Madonna. All but the last vestige of light bad been extinguished in her. The vast body threw out a tendril of saffron flame, which caught the cascade of water, and threw dancing patterns on the wall. Then it was still. When Jerry looked back for the mother and child, they had gone. Indeed all the women had gone but one. It was the girl who had first appeared to him. The smile she'd worn was on her face again as she sat across the room from him, her legs splayed. He gazed at the place between them, and then back at her face.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked.

"I'm not afraid."

"Then why don't you come to me?"

He stood up, and crossed the chamber to where she sat. Behind him, the water still slapped and ran on the tiles, and behind the fountains the Madonna murmured in her flesh. He was not intimidated by her presence. The likes of him was surely beneath the notice of such a creature. If she saw him at all she doubtless thought him ridiculous. Jesus! He was ridiculous even to himself. He had neither hope nor dignity left to lose.

Tomorrow, all this would be a dream: the water, the children, the beauty who even now stood up to embrace him. Tomorrow he would think he had died for a day, and visited a shower house for angels. For

now, he would make what he could of the opportunity.

After they had made love, he and the smiling girl, when he tried to recall the specifics of the act, he could not be certain that he had performed at all. Only the vaguest memories remained to him, and they were not of her kisses, or of how they coupled, but of a dribble of milk from her breast and the way she murmured, "Never… never… as they had entwined. When they were done, she was indifferent. There were no more words, no more smiles. She just left him alone in the drizzle of the chamber. He buttoned up his soiled trousers, and left the Madonna to her fecundity. A short corridor led out of the shower-room and into the large pool. It was, as he bad vaguely registered when they had brought him into the presence of the Madonna, brimming. Her children played in the radiant water, their forms multitudinous. The women were nowhere to be seen, but the door to the outer corridor stood open. He walked through it, and had taken no more than half a dozen steps before it slid closed behind him.

Now, all too late, Ezra Garvey knew that returning to the Pools (even for an act of intimidation, which he had traditionally enjoyed) had been an error. It had re-opened a wound in him which he had hoped near to healing; and it had brought memories of his second visit there, of the women and what they had displayed to him (memories which he had sought to clarify until he began to grasp their true nature) closer to the surface. They had drugged him somehow, hadn't they?; and then, when he was weak and had lost all sense of propriety, they had exploited him for their entertainment. They had suckled him like a child, and made him their plaything. The memories of that merely perplexed him; but there were others, too deep to be distinguished quite, which appalled. Of some inner chamber, and of water falling in a curtain; of a darkness that was terrible, and a luminescence that was more terrible still. The time had come, he knew, to trample these dreams underfoot, and be done with such bafflement. He was a man who forgot neither favours done, nor favours owed; a little before eleven he had two telephone conversations, to call some of those favours in. Whatever lived at Leopold Road Pools would prosper there no longer. Satisfied with his night's maneuvers, he went upstairs to bed.

He had drunk the best part of a bottle of schnapps since returning from the incident with Coloqhoun, chilled and uneasy. Now the spirit in his system caught up with him. His limbs felt heavy, his head heavier still. He did not even concern himself to undress, but lay down on his double bed for a few minutes to allow his senses to clear. When he next woke, it was one-thirty a.m.

He sat up. His belly was cavorting again; indeed his whole body seemed to be traumatized. He had seldom been ill in his fifty-odd years: success had kept ailments at bay. But now he felt terrible. He had a headache which was near to blinding – he stumbled from his bedroom down to the kitchen more by aid of touch than sight. There he poured himself a glass of milk, sat down at the table, and put it to his lips. He did not drink however. His gaze had alighted on the hand that held his glass. He stared at it through a fog of pain. It didn't seem to be his hand: it was too fine, too smooth. He put the glass down, trembling, but it tipped over, the milk pooling on the teak table-top and running off on to the floor.

He got to his feet, the sound of the milk on the kitchen tiles awaking curious thoughts, and moved unsteadily through to his study. He needed to be with somebody: anybody would do. He picked up his telephone book and tried to make sense of the scrawlings on each page, but the numbers would not come clear. His panic was growing. Was this insanity? The delusion of his transformed hand, the unnatural sensations which were running through his body. He reached to unbutton his shirt, and in doing so his hand brushed another delusion, more absurd than the first. Fingers unwilling, he tore at the shirt, telling himself over and over that none of this was possible.

But the evidence was plain. He touched a body which was no longer his. There were still signs that the flesh and bone belonged to him – an appendix scar on his lower abdomen, a birth-mark beneath his arm – but the substance of his body had been teased (was being teased still, even as he watched) into shapes that shamed him. He clawed at the forms that disfigured his torso, as if they might dissolve beneath his assault, but they merely bled. In his time, Ezra Garvey had suffered much, almost all his sufferings self-inflicted. He had undergone periods of imprisonment; come close to serious physical wounding; had endured the deceptions of beautiful women. But those torments were nothing beside the anguish he felt now. He was not himself! His body had been taken from his while he slept and this changeling left in its place. The honor of it shattered his self-esteem, and left his sanity teetering. Unable to hold back the tears, he began to pull at the belt of his trousers. Please God, he babbled, please God let me be whole still. He could barely see for the tears. He wiped them away, and peered at his groin. Seeing what deformities were in progress there, he roared until the windows rattled.

Garvey was not a man for prevarication. Deeds, he knew, were not best served by debate. He wasn't sure how this treatise on

transformation had been written into his system, and he didn't much care. All he could think of was how many deaths of shame he would die if this vile condition ever saw the light of day. He returned into the kitchen, selecting a large meat-knife from the drawer, then adjusted his clothing and left the house.

His tears had dried. They were wasted now, and he was not a wasteful man. He drove through the empty city down to the river, and across Blackfriars Bridge. There he parked, and walked down to the water's edge. The Thames was high and fast tonight, the tops of the waters were whipped white.

Only now, having come so far without examining his intentions too closely, did fear of extinction give him pause. He was a wealthy and influential man; were there not other mutes out of this ordeal other than the one he had come headlong to? Pill peddlers who could reverse the lunacy that had seized his cells; surgeons who might slice off the offending parts and knit his lost self back together again? But how long would such solutions last? Sooner or later, the process would begin again: he knew it. He was beyond help.

A gust of wind blew spume up off the water. It rained against his face, and the sensation finally broke the seal on his forgetfulness. At last he remembered it all: the shower-room, the spouts from the severed pipes beating on the floor, the heat, the women laughing and applauding. And finally, the thing that lived behind the water wall, a creature that was worse than any nightmare of womanhood his grieving mind had dredged up. He had fucked there, in the presence of that behemoth, and in the fury of the act – when he had momentarily forgotten himself – the bitches had worked this rapture upon him. No use for regrets. What was done, was done. At least he had made provision for the destruction of their lair. Now he would undo by self-surgery what they had contrived by magic, and so at least deny them sight of their handiwork.

The wind was cold, but his blood was hot. It came gushingly as he slashed at his body. The Thames received the libation with enthusiasm. It lapped at his feet; it whipped itself into eddies. He had not finished the job, however, when the loss of blood overcame him. No matter, he thought, as his knees buckled and he toppled into the water, no one will know me now but fishes. The prayer he offered up as the river closed over him was that death not be a woman.

Long before Garvey had woken in the night, and discovered his body in rebellion, Jerry had left the Pools, got into his car, and

attempted to drive home. He had not been the equal of that simple task, however. His eyes were bleary, his sense of direction confused. After a near accident at an intersection he parked the car and began to walk back to the flat. His memories of what had just happened to him were by no means clear, though the events were mere hours old. His head was full of strange associations. He walked in the solid world, but half dreaming. It was the sight of Chandaman and Fryer, waiting for him in the bedroom of his flat that slapped him back into reality. He did not wait for them to greet him, but turned and ran. They had emptied his stock of spirits as they lay in ambush, and were slow to respond. He was down the stairs and gone from the house before they could give chase.

He walked to Carole's; she was not in. He didn't mind waiting. He sat on the front steps of her home for half an hour, and when the tenant of the top floor flat arrived talked his way into the comparative warmth of the house itself and kept vigil on the stairs. There he fell to dozing, and retraced his steps over the route he'd come, back to the intersection where he'd abandoned the car. A crowd of people were passing the place. "Where are you going?" he asked them. "To see the yatches," they replied. "What yatches are those?" he wanted to know, but they were already drifting away, chattering. He walked on a while. The sky was dark, but the streets were illuminated nevertheless by a wash of blue and shadowless light. Just as he was about to come within sight of the Pools, he heard a splashing sound, and, turning a corner, discovered that the tide was coming in up Leopold Street. What sea was this?, he enquired of the gulls overhead, for the salt tang in the air declared these waters as ocean, not river. Did it matter what sea it was, they returned?; weren't all seas one sea, finally? He stood and watched the wavelets creeping across the tarmac. Their advance, though gentle, overturned lamp-posts, and so swiftly eroded the foundations of the buildings that they fell, silently, beneath the glacial tide. Soon the waves were around his feet. Fishes, tiny darts of silver, moved in the water.

"Jerry?"

Carole was on the stairs, staring at him.

"What the hell's happened to you?"

"I could have drowned," he said.

He told her about the trap Garvey had set at Leopold Road, and how he'd been beaten up; then of the thugs' presence at his own house. She

offered cool sympathy. He said nothing about the chase through the spiral, or the women, or the something that he'd seen in the shower-room. He couldn't have articulated it, even if he'd wanted to: every hour that passed since he'd left the Pool he was less certain of having seen anything at all. * * *

"Do you want to stay here?" she asked him when he's finished his account.

"I thought you'd never ask."

"You'd better have a bath. Are you sure they didn't break any bones?"

"I think I'd feel it by now if they had."

No broken bones, perhaps; but he had not escaped unmarked. His torso was a patchwork of ripening bruises, and he ached from head to foot. When, after half an hour of soaking, he got out of the bath and surveyed himself in the mirror, his body seemed to be puffed up by the beating, the skin of his chest tender and tight. He was not a pretty sight.

Tomorrow, you must go to the police," Carole told him later as they lay side by side. "And have this bastard Garvey arrested-”

"I suppose so…" he said.

She leaned over him. His face was bland with fatigue. She kissed him lightly.

"I'd like to love you," she said. He did not look at her. "Why do you make it so difficult?"

"Do I?" he said, his eyelids drooping. She wanted to slide her hand beneath the bath-robe he was still wearing – she had never quite understood his coyness, but it charmed her – and caress him. But there was a certain insularity in the way he lay that signaled his wish to be left untouched, and she respected it.

I'll turn out the light," she said, but he was already asleep.

The tide was not kind to Ezra Garvey. It picked up his body and played it back and forth awhile, picking at it like a replete diner toying with food he had no appetite for. It carried the corpse a mile downstream, and then tired of its burden. The current relegated it to

the slower water near the banks, and there – abreast of Battersea – it became snagged in a mooring rope. The tide went out; Garvey did not. As the water-level dropped he remained depending from the rope, his bloodless bulk revealed inch by inch as the tide left him, and the dawn came looking. By eight o'clock he had gained more than morning as an audience.

Jerry woke to the sound of the shower running in the adjacent bathroom. The bedroom curtains were still drawn across. Only a fine dart of light found its way down to where he lay. He rolled over to bury his head in the pillow where the light couldn't disturb him, but his brain, once stirred, began to whirl. He had a difficult day ahead, in which he would have to make some account of recent events to the police. There would be questions asked and some of them might prove uncomfortable. The sooner he thought his story through, the more water-tight it would be. He rolled over, and threw off the sheet.

His first thought as he looked down at himself was that he had not truly woken yet, but still had his face buried in the pillow, and was merely dreaming this waking. Dreaming too the body he inhabited - with its budding breasts and its soft belly. This was not his body; his was of the other sex.

He tried to shake himself awake, but there was nowhere to wake to. He was here. This transformed anatomy was his – its slit, its smoothness, its strange weight – all his. In the hours since midnight he had been unknitted and remade in another image.

From next door, the sound of the shower brought the Madonna back into his head. Brought the woman too, who had coaxed him into her and whispered, as he frowned and thrust, "Never… never…", telling him, though he couldn't know it, that this coupling was his last as a man. They had conspired – woman and Madonna – to work this wonder upon him, and wasn't it the finest failure of his life that he would not even hold on to his own sex; that maleness itself, like wealth and influence, was promised, then snatched away again?

He got up off the bed, turning his hands over to admire their newfound fineness, running his palms across his breasts. He was not afraid, nor was he jubilant. He accepted this fair accompli as a baby accepts its condition, having no sense of what good or bad it might bring.

Perhaps there were more enchantments where this had come from. If so, he would go back to the Pools and find them for himself; follow

the spiral into its hot heart, and debate mysteries with the Madonna.

There were miracles in the world! Forces that could turn flesh inside out without drawing blood; that could topple the tyranny of the real and make play in its rubble.

Next door, the shower continued to run. He went to the bathroom door, which was slightly ajar, and peered in. Though the shower was on, Carole was not under it. She was sitting on the side of the bath, her hands pressed over her face. She heard him at the door. Her body shook. She did not look up.

"I saw…" she said. Her voice was guttural; thick with barely-suppressed abhorrence."…am I going mad?" "No."

"Then what's happening?"

"I don't know," he replied, simply. "Is it so terrible?"

"Vile," she said. "Revolting. I don't want to look at you. You hear me? I don't want to see."

He didn't attempt to argue. She didn't want to know him, and that was her prerogative.

He slipped through into the bedroom, dressed in his stale and dirty clothes, and headed back to the Pool.

He went unnoticed; or rather, if anybody along his route noted a strangeness in their fellow pedestrian – a disparity between the clothes worn and the body that wore them – they looked the other way, unwilling to tackle such a problem at such an hour, and sober.

When he arrived at Leopold Road there were several men on the steps. They were talking, though he didn't know it, of imminent demolition. Jerry lingered in the doorway of a shop across the road from the Pools until the trio departed, and then made his way to the front door. He feared that they might have changed the lock, but they hadn't he got in easily, and closed the door behind him.

He bad not brought a torch, but when he plunged into the labyrinth he trusted to his instinct, and it did not forsake him. After a few minutes of exploration in the benighted corridors he stumbled across the jacket which he had discarded the previous day; a few turns beyond he came into the chamber where the laughing girl had found him. There was a hint of daylight here, from the pool beyond. All but

the last vestiges of that luminescence that had first led him here bad gone.

He hurried on through the chamber, his hopes sinking. The water still brimmed in the pool, but almost all its light bad flickered out. He studied the broth: there was no movement in the depths. They had gone. The mothers the children. And, no doubt, the first cause lie Madonna.

He walked through to the shower-room. She had indeed left. Furthermore, the chamber had been destroyed, as if in a fit of pique. The tiles had been torn from the walls; the pipes ripped from the plasterwork and melted in the Madonna's heat. Here and there he saw splashes of blood.

Turning his back on the wreckage, he returned to the pool, wondering if it had been his invasion that bad frightened them from this makeshift temple. Whatever the reason, the witches had gone, and he, their creature, was left to fend for himself, deprived of their mysteries.

He wandered along the edge of the pool, despairing. The surface of the water was not quite calm: a circle of ripples had awoken in it, and was growing by the heart-beat. He stared at the eddy as it gained momentum, flinging its arms out across the pool. The water-level had suddenly begun to drop. The eddy was rapidly becoming a whirlpool, the water foaming about it. Some trap had been opened in the bottom of the pool, and the waters were draining away. Was this where the Madonna had fled? He rushed back to the far end of the pool and examined the tiles. Yes! She had left a trail of fluid behind her as she crept out of her shrine to the safety of the pool. And if this was where she had gone, would they not all have followed?

Where the waters were draining to he had no way of knowing. To the sewers maybe, and then to the river, and finally out to sea. To death by drowning; to the extinction of magic. Or by some secret channel down into the earth, to some sanctuary safe from enquiry where rapture was not forbidden.

The water was rapidly becoming frenzied as suction called it away. The vortex whirled and foamed and spat. He studied the shape it described. A spiral of course, elegant and inevitable. The waters were sinking fast now; the splashing had mounted to a roar. Very soon it would all be gone, the door to another world sealed up and lost. He had no choice: he leapt. The circling undertow snatched at him

immediately. He barely had time to draw breath before he was sucked beneath the surface and dragged round and round, down and down. He felt himself buffeted against the floor of the pool, then somersaulted as he was pulled inexorably closer to the exit. He opened his eyes. Even as he did so the current dragged him to the brink, and over. The stream took him in its custody, and flung him back and forth in its fury.

There was light ahead. How far it lay, he couldn't calculate, but what did it matter? If he drowned before he reached that place, and ended this journey dead, so what? Death was no m ore certain than the dream of masculinity he'd lived these years. Terms of description fit only to be turned up and over and inside out. The earth was bright, wasn't it, and probably full of stars. He opened his mouth and shouted into the whirlpool, as the light grew and grew, an anthem in praise of paradox.

XXIV: BABEL'S CHILDREN

Why could Vanessa never resist the road that had no signpost marking it; the track that led to God alone knew where? Her enthusiasm for following her nose had got her into trouble often enough in the past. A near-fatal night spent lost in the Alps; that episode in Marrakech that had almost ended in rape; the adventure with the sword swallower's apprentice in the wilds of Lower Manhattan. And yet despite what bitter experience should have taught her, when the choice lay between the marked route and the unmarked, she would always, without question, take the latter.

Here, for instance. This road that meandered towards the coast of Kithnos: what could it possibly offer her but an uneventful drive through the scrub land hereabouts – a chance encounter with a goat along the way – and a view from the cliffs of the blue Aegean. She could enjoy such a view from her hotel at Merikha Bay, and scarcely get out of bed to do so. But the other highways that led from this crossroads were so clearly marked: one to Loutra, with its ruined Venetian fort, the other to Driopis. She had visited neither village, and had heard that both were charming, but the fact that they were so clearly named seriously marred their attraction for her. This other road, however, though it might – indeed probably did – lead nowhere, at least led to an unnamed nowhere. That was no small recommendation. Thus fuelled by sheer perversity, she set off along it.

The landscape to either side of the road (or, as it rapidly became, track) was at best undistinguished. Even the goats she had anticipated were not in evidence here, but then the sparse vegetation looked less than nourishing. The island was no paradise. Unlike Santorini, with its picturesque volcano, or Mykonos – the Sodom of the Cyclades -with its plush beaches and plusher hotels Kithnos could boast nothing that might draw the tourist. That, in short, was why she was here: as far from the crowd as she could conspire to get. This track, no doubt, would take her further still. The cry she heard from the hillocks off to her left was not meant to be ignored. It was a cry of naked alarm, and it was perfectly audible above the grumbling of her hired car. She brought the ancient vehicle to a halt, and turned off the engine. The cry came again, but this time it was followed by a shot, and a space, then a second shot. Without thinking, she opened the car door and stepped out onto the track. The air was fragrant with sand lilies and wild thyme – scents which the petrol-stench inside the car had effectively masked. Even as she breathed the perfume she heard a

third shot, and this time she saw a figure – too far from where she stood to be recognizable, even if it had been her husband – mounting the crown of one of the hillocks, only to disappear into a trough again. Three or four beats later, and his pursuers appeared. Another shot was fired; but, she was relieved to see, into the air rather than at the man. They were warning him to stop rather than aiming to kill. The details of the pursuers were as indistinct as those of the escapee except that – an ominous touch -they were dressed from head to foot in billowing black garb. She hesitated at the side of the car, not certain of whether she should get back in and drive away or go and find out what this hide-and-seek was all about. The sound of guns was not particularly pleasant, but could she possibly turn her back on such a mystery? The men in black had disappeared after their quarry, but she pinned her eyes to the spot they had left, and started off towards it, keeping her head down as best she could.

Distances were deceptive in such unremarkable terrain; one sandy hillock looked much like the next. She picked her way amongst the squirting cucumber for fully ten minutes before she became certain that she had missed the spot from which pursued and pursuer had vanished – and by that time she was lost in a sea of grass-crested knolls. The cries had long since ceased, the shots too. She was left only with the sound of gulls, and the rasping debate of cicadas around her feet.

"Damn," she said. "Why do I do these things?"

She selected the largest hillock in the vicinity and trudged up its flank, her feet uncertain in the sandy soil, to see if the vantage-point offered a view of the track she'd left, or even of the sea. If she could locate the cliffs, she could orient herself relative to the spot on which she'd left the car, and head off in that approximate direction, knowing that sooner or later she'd be bound to reach the track. But the hummock was too puny; all that was revealed from its summit was the extent of her isolation. In every direction, the same indistinguishable hills, raising their backs to the afternoon sun. In desperation, she licked her finger and put it up to the wind, reasoning that the breeze would most likely be off the sea, and that she might use that slender information to base her mental cartography upon. The breeze was negligible, but it was the only guide she had, and she set off in the direction she hoped the track lay. After five increasingly breathless minutes of tramping up and down the hillocks, she scaled one of the slopes and found herself looking not upon her car but at a cluster of white-washed buildings -dominated by a squat tower and ringed like a garrison with a high wall – which her previous perches had given her

no glimpse of. It immediately occurred to her that the running man and his three over-attentive admirers had originated here, and that wisdom probably counseled against approaching the place. But then without directions from somebody might she not wander around forever in this wasteland and never find her way back to the car? Besides, the buildings looked reassuringly unpretentious. There was even a hint of foliage peeping above the bright walls that suggested a sequestered garden within, where she might at least get some shade. Changing direction, she headed towards the entrance.

She arrived at the wrought-iron gates exhausted. Only when in sight of comfort would she concede the weight of her weariness to herself: the trudge across the hillocks had reduced her thighs and shins to quivering incompetence. One of the large gates was ajar, and she stepped through. The yard beyond was paved, and mottled with doves' droppings: several of the culprits sat in a myrtle tree and cooed at her appearance. From the yard several covered walkways led off into a maze of buildings. Her perversity unchastened by adventure, she followed the one that looked least promising and it led her out of the sun and into a balmy passage, lined with plain benches, and out the other side into a smaller enclosure. Here the sun fell upon one of the walls, in a niche of which stood a statue of the Virgin Mary – her notorious child, fingers raised in blessing, perched upon her arm. And now, seeing the statue, the pieces of this mystery fell into place: the secluded location, the silence, the plainness of the yards and walkways this was surely a religious establishment.

She had been godless since early adolescence, and had seldom stepped over the threshold of a church in the intervening twenty-five years. Now, at forty-one, she was past recall, and so felt doubly a trespasser here. But then she wasn't seeking sanctuary, was she?; merely directions. She could ask them, and get gone.

As she advanced across the sunlit stone she had that curious sensation of self-consciousness which she associated with being spied upon. It was a sensitivity her life with Ronald had sophisticated into a sixth sense. His ridiculous jealousies, which had, only three months previous, ended their marriage, had led him to spying strategies that would not have shamed the agencies of Whitehall or Washington. Now she felt not one, but several pairs of eyes upon her. Though she squinted up at the narrow windows that overlooked the courtyard, and seemed to see movement at one of them, nobody made any effort to call down to her, however. A mute order, perhaps, their vow of silence so profoundly observed that she would have to communicate in sign-language? Well, so be it.

Somewhere behind her, she heard running feet; several pairs, rushing towards her. And from down the walkway, the sound of the iron gates clanging closed. For some reason her heart-beat tripped over itself, and alarmed her blood. Startled, it leapt to her face. Her weakened legs began to quiver again.

She turned to face the owners of those urgent footsteps, and as she did so caught sight of the stone Virgin's head moving a fraction. Its blue eyes had followed her across the yard, and now were unmistakably following her back. She stood stock still; best not to run, she thought, with Our Lady at your back. It would have done no good to have taken flight anyway, because even now three nuns were appearing from out of the shadow of the cloisters, their vestments billowing. Only their beards, and the gleaming automatic rifles they carried, fractured the illusion of their being Christ's brides. She might have laughed at this incongruity, but that they were pointing their weapons straight at her heart.

There was no word of explanation offered; but then in a place that harboured armed men dressed as nuns a glimpse of sweet reason was doubtless as rare as feathered frogs.

She was bundled out of the courtyard by the three holy sisters -who treated her as though she had just razed the Vatican – and summarily searched her high and low. She took this invasion without more than a cursory objection. Not for a moment did they take their rifle-sights off her, and in such circumstances obedience seemed best. Search concluded, one of them invited her to re-dress, and she was escorted to a small room and locked in. A little while later, one of the nuns brought her a bottle of palatable retsina, and, to complete this catalogue of incongruities, the best deep-dish pizza she'd had this side of Chicago. Alice, lost in Wonderland, could not have thought it curiouser.

There may have been an error," the man with the waxed moustache conceded after several hours of interrogation. She was relieved to discover he had no desire to pass as an Abbess, despite the garb of the garrison. His office – if such it was – was sparsely furnished, its only remarkable artifact a human skull, its bottom jaw missing, which sat on the desk and peered vacuously at her. He himself was better dressed; his bow-tie immaculately tied, his trousers holding a lethal crease. Beneath his calculated English, Vanessa thought she sniffed the hint of an accent. French? German? It was only when he produced some chocolate from his desk that she decided he was Swiss. His name, he claimed, was Mr. Klein.

"An error?" she said. "You're damn right there's been an error!" "We've located your car. We have also checked with your hotel. So far, your story has been verified."

"I'm not a liar," she said. She was well past the point of courtesy with Mr. Klein, despite his bribes with the confectionery. By now it must be late at night, she guessed, though as she wore no watch and the bald little room, which was in the bowels of one of the buildings, had no windows, it was difficult to be certain. Time had been telescoped with only Mr. Klein, and his undernourished Number Two, to hold her wearied attention. "Well I'm glad you're satisfied," she said, "Now will you let me get back to my hotel? I'm tired."

Klein shook his head. "No," he said. I'm afraid that won't be possible."

Vanessa stood up quickly, and the violence of her movement overturned the chair. Within a second of the sound the door had opened and one of the bearded sisters appeared, pistol at the ready.

"It's all right, Stanislaus," Mr. Klein purred, "Mrs. Jape hasn't slit my throat."

Sister Stanislaus withdrew, and closed the door behind him. "Why?" said Vanessa, her anger distracted by the appearance of the guard.

"Why what?" Mr. Klein asked. The nuns."

Klein sighed heavily, and put his hand on the coffee-pot that had been brought a full hour earlier, to see if it was still warm. He poured himself half a cup before replying. "In my own opinion, much of this is redundant, Mrs. Jape, and you have my personal assurance that I will see you released as rapidly as is humanly possible. In the meanwhile I beg your indulgence. Think of it as a game…" His face soured slightly."… They like games." "Who do?" Klein frowned. "Never mind," he said. "The less you know the less we'll have to make you forget." Vanessa gave the skull a beady eye. "None of this makes any sense," she said.

"Nor should it," Mr. Klein replied. He paused to sip his stale coffee. "You made a regrettable error in coming here, Mrs. Jape. And indeed, we made an error letting you in. Normally, our defences are stricter than you found them. But you caught us off-guard… and the next thing we knew -"

"Look," said Vanessa, "I don't know what's going on here. I don't

want to know. All I want is to be allowed to go back to my hotel and finish my holiday in peace." Judging by the expression on her interrogator's face, her appeal was not proving persuasive. "Is that so much to ask?" she said. "I haven't done anything, I haven't seen anything. What's the problem?"

Mr. Klein stood up.

"The problem," he repeated quietly to himself. "Now there's a question." He didn't attempt to answer, however. Merely called: "Stanislaus?"

The door opened, and the nun was there.

"Return Mrs. Jape to her room, will you?"

"I shall protest to my Embassy!" Vanessa said, her resentment flaring. "I have rights!"

"Please," said Mr. Klein, looking pained. "Shouting will help none of us."

The nun took hold of Vanessa's arm. She felt the proximity of his pistol.

"Shall we go?" he asked politely.

"Do I have any choice?" she replied.

"No."

The trick of good farce, she had once been informed by her brother-in-law, a sometime actor, was that it be played with deadly seriousness. There should be no sly winks to the gallery, signaling the farceur's comic intention; no business that was so outrageous it would undermine the reality of the piece. By these stringent standards she was surrounded by a cast of experts: all willing – habits, wimples and spying Madonnas notwithstanding – to perform as though this ridiculous situation was in no way out of the ordinary. Try as she might, she could not call their bluff; not break their po-faces, not win a single sign of self-consciousness from them. Clearly she lacked the requisite skills for this kind of comedy. The sooner they realized their error and discharged her from the company the happier she'd be.

She slept well, helped on her way by half the contents of a bottle of whisky that some thoughtful person had left in her little room when

she returned to it. She had seldom drunk so much in such a short period of time, and when – just about dawn – she was woken by a light tapping on her door, her head felt swollen, and her tongue like a suede glove. It took her a moment to orient herself, during which time the rapping was repeated, and the small window in the door opened from the other side. An urgent face was pressed to it: that of an old man, with a fungal beard and wild eyes. "Mrs. Jape," he hissed. "Mrs. Jape. May we have words?"

She crossed to the door and looked through the window. The old man's breath was two-parts stale ouzo to one of fresh air. It kept her from pressing too close to the window, though he beckoned her.

"W ho are you?" Vanessa asked, not simply out of abstract curiosity, but because the features, sunburnt and leathery, reminded her of somebody.

The man gave her a fluttering look. "An admirer," he said. "Do I know you?"

He shook his head. "You're much too young," he said. "But I know you. I watched you come in. I wanted to warn you, but I didn't have time."

"Are you a prisoner here too?"

"In a manner of speaking. Tell me… did you see Floyd?"

"Who?"

"He escaped. The day before yesterday."

"Oh," Vanessa said, beginning to thread these dropped pearls together. "Floyd was the man they were chasing?" "Certainly. He slipped out, you see. They went after him – the clods – and left the gate open. The security is shocking these days -" He sounded genuinely outraged by the situation." – Not that I'm not pleased you're here." There was some desperation in his eyes, she thought; some sorrow he fought to keep submerged. "We heard shots," he said. "They didn't get him, did they?"

"Not that I saw," Vanessa replied. "I went to look. But there was no sign -"

"Ha!" said the old man, brightening. "Maybe he did get away then."

It had already occurred to Vanessa that this conversation might be a trap; that the old man was her captor's dupe, and this was just another way to squeeze information from her. But her instincts instructed otherwise. He looked at her with such affection, and his face, which was that of a maestro clown, seemed incapable of forged feeling. For better or worse, she trusted him. She had little choice.

"Help me get out," she said. "I have to get out."

He looked crest-fallen. "So soon?" he said. "You only just arrived."

"I'm not a thief. I don't like being locked up."

He nodded. "Of course you don't," he replied, silently admonishing himself for his selfishness. "I'm sorry. It's just that a beautiful woman -" He stopped himself, then began again, on a fresh tack. "I never had much of a way with words…"

"Are you sure I don't know you from somewhere?" Vanessa inquired. "Your face is somehow familiar." "Really?" he said. "That's very nice. We all think we're forgotten here, you see."

"All?"

"We were snatched away such a time ago. Many of us were only beginning our researches. That's why Floyd made a run for it. He wanted to do a few months' decent work before the end. I feel the same sometimes." His melancholy train halted, and he returned to her question. "My name is Harvey Gomm; Professor Harvey Gomm. Though these days I forget what I was professor of."

Gomm. It was a singular name, and it rang bells, but she could at present find no tune in the chimes. "You don't remember, do you?" he said, looking straight into her eyes.

She wished she could lie, but that might alienate the fellow – the only voice of sanity she'd discovered here – more than the truth; which was: "No… I don't exactly remember. Maybe a clue?"

But before he could offer her another piece of his mystery, he heard voices.

"Can't talk now, Mrs. Jape."

"Call me Vanessa."

"May I?" His face bloomed in the warmth of her beneficence. "Vanessa."

"You will help me?" she said.

"As best I may," he replied. "but if you see me in company -"

" – We never met."

"Precisely. Au revoir." He closed the panel in the door, and she heard his footsteps vanish down the corridor. When her custodian, an amiable thug called Guillemot, arrived several minutes later bearing a tray of tea, she was all smiles.

Her outburst of the previous day seemed to have born some fruit. That morning, after breakfast, Mr. Klein called in briefly and told her that she would be allowed out into the grounds of the place (with Guillemot in attendance), so that she might enjoy the sun. She was further supplied with a new set of clothes – a little large for her, but a welcome relief from the sweaty garments she had now worn for over twenty-four hours. This last concession to her comfort was a curates' egg, however. Pleased as she was to be wearing clean underwear the fact that the clothes had been supplied at all suggested that Mr. Klein was not anticipating a prompt release.

How long would it be, she tried to calculate, before the rather obtuse manager of her tiny hotel realized that she wasn't coming back; and in that event, what he would do? Perhaps he had already alerted the authorities; perhaps they would find the abandoned car and trace her to this curious fortress. On this last point her hopes were dashed that very morning, during her constitutional. The car was parked in the laurel-tree enclosure beside the gate, and to judge by the copious blessings rained upon it by the doves had been there overnight. Her captors were not fools. She might have to wait until somebody back in England became concerned, and attempted to trace her whereabouts, during which time she might well die of boredom.

Others in the place had found diversions to keep them from insanity's door. As she and Guillemot wandered around the grounds that morning she could distinctly hear voices – one of them Gomm's – from a nearby courtyard. They were raised in excitement. "What's going on?"

"They're playing games," Guillemot replied.

"Can we go and watch?" she asked casually.

"No-”

"I like games."

"Do you?" he said. "We'll play then, eh?"

This wasn't the response she'd wanted, but pressing the point might have aroused suspicion.

"Why not?" she said. W inning the man's trust could only be to her advantage.

"Poker?" he said.

"I've never played."

"I'll teach you," he replied. The thought clearly pleased him. In the adjacent courtyard the players now sent up a din of shouts. It sounded to be some kind of race, to judge by the mingled calls of encouragement, and the subsequent deflation as the winning-post was achieved. Guillemot caught her listening.

"Frogs," he said. "They're racing frogs."

"I wondered."

Guillemot looked at her almost fondly, and said, "Better not."

Despite Guillemot's advice, once her attention focused on the sound of the games she could not drive the din from her head. It continued through the afternoon, rising and falling. Sometimes laughter would erupt; as often, there would arguments. They were like children, Gomm and his friends, the way they fought over such an inconsequential pursuit as racing frogs. But in lieu of more nourishing diversions, could she blame them? When Gomm's face appeared at the door later that evening, almost the first thing she said was: "I heard you this morning, in one of the courtyards. And then this afternoon, too. You seemed to be having a good deal of fun."

"Oh, the games," Gomm replied. "It was a busy day. So much to be sorted out."

"Do you think you could persuade them to let me join you? I'm getting so bored in here."

"Poor Vanessa. I wish I could help. But it's practically impossible. We're so overworked at the moment, especially with Floyd's escape."

Overworked?, she thought, racing frogs? Fearing to offend, she didn't voice the doubt. "What's going on here?" she said. "You're not criminals, are you?"

Gomm looked outraged. "Criminals?"

"I'm sorry…"

"No. I understand why you asked. I suppose it must strike you as odd… our being locked up here. But no, we're not criminals.

"What then? What's the big secret?"

Gomm took a deep breath before replying. "If I tell you," he said, “will you help us to get out of here?" "How?"

"Your car. It's at the front."

"Yes, I saw it…"

"If we could get to it, would you drive us?"

"How many of you?"

"Four. There's me, there's Ireniya, there's Mottershead, and Goldberg. Of course Floyd's probably out there somewhere, but he'll just have to look after himself, won't he?"

"It's a small car," she warned.

"We're small people," Gomm returned. "You shrink with age, you know, like dried fruit. And we're old. With Floyd we had three hundred and ninety-eight years between us. All that bitter experience," he said, “and not one of us wise."

In the yard outside Vanessa's room shouting suddenly erupted. Gomm disappeared from the door, and reappeared again briefly to murmur: "They found him. Oh my God: they found him." Then he fled.

Vanessa crossed to the window and peered through. She could not see much of the yard below, but what she could see was full of frenzied activity, sisters hithering and thithering. At the centre of this commotion she could see a small figure – the runaway Floyd, no doubt – struggling in the grip of two guards. He looked to be much the worse for his days and nights of living rough, his drooping features dirtied, his balding pate peeling from an excess of sun. Vanessa heard the voice of Mr. Klein rise above the babble, and he stepped into the

scene. He approached Floyd and proceeded to berate him mercilessly. Vanessa could not catch more than one in every ten words, but the verbal assault rapidly reduced the old man to tears. She turned away from the window, silently praying that Klein would choke on his next piece of chocolate.

So far, her time here had brought a curious collection of experiences: one moment pleasant (Gomm's smile, the pizza, the sound of games played in a similar courtyard), the next – (the interrogation, the bullying she'd just witnessed) unpalatable. And still she was no nearer understanding what the function of this prison was: why it only had five inmates (six, if she included herself) and all so old -shrunk by age, Gomm had said. But after Klein's humiliation of Floyd she was now certain that no secret, however pressing, would keep her from aiding Gomm in his bid for freedom.

The Professor did not come back that evening, which disappointed her. Perhaps Floyd's recapture had meant stricter regulations about the place, she reasoned, though that principle scarcely applied to her. She, it seemed, was practically forgotten. Though Guillemot brought her food and drink he did not stay to teach her poker as they had arranged, nor was she escorted out to take the air. Left in the stuffy room without company, her mind undisturbed by any entertainment but counting her toes, she rapidly became listless and sleepy.

Indeed, she was dozing through the middle of the afternoon when something hit the wall outside the window. She got up, and was crossing to see what the sound was when an object was hurled through the window. It landed with a clunk on the floor. She went to snatch a glimpse of the sender, but he'd gone.

The tiny parcel was a key wrapped in a note. "Vanessa," it read, "Be ready. Yours, in saecula saeculorum. H.G." Latin was not her forte; she hoped the final words were an endearment, not an instruction. She tried the key in the door of her cell. It worked. Clearly Gomm didn't intend her to use it now, however, but to wait for some signal. Be ready, he'd written. Easier said than done, of course. It was so tempting, with the door open and the passageway out to the sun clear, to forget Gomm and the others and make a break for it. But H.G. had doubtless taken some risk acquiring the key. She owed him her allegiance.

After that, there was no more dozing. Every time she heard a footstep in the cloisters, or a shout in the yard, she was up and ready. But Gomm's call didn't come. The afternoon dragged on into evening.

Guillemot appeared with another pizza and a bottle of coca-cola for dinner, and before she knew it night had fallen and another day was gone. Perhaps they would come by cover of darkness, she thought, but they didn't. The moon rose, its seas smirking, and there was still no sign of H.G. or this promised exodus. She began to suspect the worst: that their plan had been discovered, and they were all being punished for it. If so, would not Mr. Klein sooner or later root out her involvement? Though her part had been minimal, what sanctions might the chocolate-man take out against her? Sometime after midnight she decided that waiting here for the axe to fall was not her style at all, and she would be wise to do as Floyd had done, and run for it.

She let herself out of the cell, and locked it behind her, then hurried along the cloisters, cleaving to the shadows as best she could. There was no sign of human presence – but she remembered the watchful Virgin, who'd first spied on her. Nothing was to be trusted here. By stealth and sheer good fortune she eventually found her way out into the yard in which Floyd had faced Mr. Klein. There she paused, to work out which way the exit lay from here. But clouds had moved across the face of the moon, and in darkness her fitful sense of direction deserted her completely. Trusting to the luck that had got her thus far unarrested, she chose one of the exits from the yard, and slipped through it, following her nose along a covered walkway which twisted and turned before leading out into yet another courtyard, larger than the first. A light breeze teased the leaves of two entwined laurel-trees in the centre of the yard; night insects tuned up in the walls. Peaceable as it was, the square offered no promising route that she could see, and she was about to go back the way she'd come when the moon shook off its veils and lit the yard from wall to wall. It was empty, but for the laurel-trees, and the shadow of the laurel-trees, but that shadow fell across an elaborate design which had been painted onto the pavement of the yard. She stared at it, too curious to retreat, though she could make no sense of the thing at first; the pattern seemed to be just that: a pattern. She stalked it along one edge, trying to fathom out its significance. Then it dawned on her that she was viewing the entire picture upside-down. She moved to the other side of the courtyard and the design came clear. It was a map of the world, reproduced down to the most insignificant isle. All the great cities were marked and the oceans and continents crisscrossed with hundreds of fine lines that marked latitudes, longitudes and much else besides. Though many of the symbols were idiosyncratic, it was clear that the map was rife with political detail. Contested borders; territorial waters; exclusion zones. Many of these had been drawn and

re-drawn in chalk, as if in response to daily intelligence. In some regions, where events were particularly fraught, the land-mass was all but obscured by scribblings.

Fascination came between her and her safety. She didn't hear the footsteps at the North Pole until their owner was stepping out of hiding and into the moonlight. She was about to make a run for it, when she recognized Gomm. "Don't move," he murmured across the world.

She did as she was instructed. Glancing around him like a besieged rabbit until he was certain the yard was deserted, H.G. crossed to where Vanessa stood.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded of her.

"You didn't come," she accused him. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

Things got difficult. They watch us all the time." "I couldn't go on waiting, Harvey. This is no place to take a holiday."

"You're right, of course," he said, a picture of dejection. "It's hopeless. Hopeless. You should make your getaway on your own. Forget about us. They'll never let us out. The truth's too terrible."

"What truth?"

He shook his head. "Forget about it. Forget we ever met."

Vanessa took hold of his spindly arm. "I will not," she said. "I have to know what's happening here." Gomm shrugged. "Perhaps you should know. Perhaps the whole world should know." He took her hand, and they retreated into the relative safety of the cloisters.

"What's the map for?" was her first question.

This is where we play -" he replied, staring at the turmoil of scrawlings on the courtyard floor. He sighed. "Of course it wasn't always games. But systems decay, you know. It's an irrefutable condition common to both matter and ideas. You start off with fine intentions and in two decades… two decades…" he repeated, as if the fact appalled him afresh,"… we're playing with frogs."

"You're not making much sense, Harvey," Vanessa said. "Are you being deliberately obtuse or is this senility?" He prickled at the accusation, but it did the trick. Gaze still fixed on the map of the

world, he delivered the next words crisply as if he'd rehearsed this confession.

There was a day of sanity, back in 1962, in which it occurred to the potentates that they were on the verge of destroying the world. Even to potentates the idea of an earth only fit for cockroaches was not particularly beguiling. If annihilation was to be prevented, they decided, our better instincts had to prevail. The mighty gathered behind locked doors at a symposium in Geneva. There had never been such a meeting of minds. The leaders of Politburos and Parliaments, Congresses, Senates – the Lords of the earth – in one colossal debate. And it was decided that in future world affairs should be overseen by a special committee, made up of great and influential minds like my own – men and women who were not subject to the whims of political favour, who could offer some guiding principles to keep the species from mass suicide. This committee was to be made up of people in many areas of human endeavour – the best of the best – an intellectual and moral elite, whose collective wisdom would bring a new golden age. That was the theory anyway Vanessa listened, without voicing the hundred questions his short speech had so far brought to mind. Gomm went on.

" – and for a while, it worked. It really worked. There were only thirteen of us – to keep some consensus. A Russian, a few of us Europeans – dear Yoniyoko, of course – a New Zealander, a couple of Americans… we were a high powered bunch. Two Nobel prize winners, myself included -"

Now she remembered Gomm, or at least where she'd once seen that face. They had both been much younger. She a schoolgirl, taught his theories by rote.

" – our brief was to encourage mutual understanding between the powers-that-be, help shape compassionate economic structures and develop the cultural identity of emergent nations. All platitudes, of course, but they sounded fine at the time. As it was, almost from the beginning our concerns were territorial."

Territorial?"

Gomm made an expansive gesture, taking in the map in front of him. "Helping to divide the world up," he said. "Regulating little wars so they didn't become big wars, keeping dictatorships from getting too full of themselves. We became the world's domestics, cleaning up wherever the dirt got too thick. It was a great responsibility, but we

shouldered it quite happily. It rather pleased us, at the beginning, to think that we thirteen were shaping the world, and that nobody but the highest echelons of government knew that we even existed."

This, thought Vanessa, was the Napoleon Syndrome writ large. Gomm was indisputably insane: but what an heroic insanity! And it was essentially harmless. Why did they have to lock him up? He surely wasn't capable of doing damage.

"It seems unfair," she said, “that you're locked away in here -”

"Well that's for our own security, of course," Gomm replied. "Imagine the chaos if some anarchist group found out where we operated from, and did away with us. We run the world. It wasn't meant to be that way, but as I said, systems decay. As time went by the potentates – knowing they had us to make critical decisions for them – concerned themselves more and more with the pleasures of high office and less and less with thinking. Within five years we were no longer advisers, but surrogate overlords, juggling nations."

"What fun," Vanessa said.

"For a while, perhaps," Gomm replied. "But the glamour faded very quickly. And after a decade or so, the pressure began to tell. Half of the committee are already dead. Golovatenko threw himself out of a window. Buchanan – the New Zealander – had syphilis and didn't know it. Old age caught up with dear Yoniyoko, and Bernheimer and Sour butts. It'll catch up with all of us sooner or later, and Klein keeps promising to provide people to take over when we've gone, but they don't care. They don't give a damn! We're functionaries, that's all." He was getting quite agitated. "As long as we provide them with judgements, they're happy. Well…" his voice dropped to a whisper, “we're giving it up."

Was this a moment of self-realization?, Vanessa wondered. Was the sane man in Gomm's head attempting to throw off the fiction of world domination? If so, perhaps she could aid the process.

"You want to get away?" she said.

Gomm nodded. "I'd like to see my home once more before I die. I've given up so much, Vanessa, for the committee, and it almost drove me mad -” Ah, she thought, he knows. "Does it sound selfish if I say that my life seems too great a sacrifice to make for global peace?" She smiled at his pretensions to power, but said nothing. "If it does, it does! I'm unrepentant. I want out! I want -”

"Keep your voice down," she advised.

Gomm remembered himself, and nodded.

"I want a little freedom before I die. We all do. And we thought you could help us, you see." He looked at her. "What's wrong?" he said.

"Wrong?"

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're not well, Harvey. I don't think you're dangerous, but -”

"Wait a minute," Gomm said. "What do you think I've been telling you? I go to all this trouble…" "Harvey. It's a fine story…"

"Story? What do you mean, story?" he said, petulantly. "Oh… I see. "You don't believe me, do you? That's it! I just told you the greatest secret in the world, and you don't believe me!"

"I'm not saying you're lying -”

"Is that it?" You think I'm a lunatic!" Gomm exploded. His voice echoed around the rectangular world. Almost immediately there were voices from several of the buildings, and fast upon those the thunder of feet. "Now look what you've done," Gomm said.

"I've done?"

"We're in trouble."

"Look, H.G., this doesn't mean -”

Too late for retractions. You stay where you are – I'm going to make a run for it. Distract them." He was about to depart when he turned back to her, caught hold of her hand, and put it to his lips. "If I'm mad," he said, “you made me that way."

Then he was off, his short legs carrying him at a fair speed across the yard. He did not even reach the laurel-trees however, before the guards arrived. They shouted for him to stop. When he failed to do so one of the men fired. Bullets ploughed the ocean around Gomm's feet.

"All right," he yelled, coming to halt and putting his hands in the air. "Mea culpa!"

The firing stopped. The guards parted as their commander stepped

through.

"Oh, it's you, Sidney," H. G. said to the Captain. The man visibly flinched to be so addressed in front of inferior ranks.

"What are you doing out at this time of night?" Sidney demanded.

"Star-gazing," Gomm replied.

"You weren't alone," the Captain said. Vanessa's heart sank. There was no route back to her room without crossing the open courtyard; and even now, with the alarm raised, Guillemot would probably be checking on her. That's true," said Gomm. "I wasn't alone." Had she offended the old man so much he was now going to betray her? "I saw the woman you brought in -"

"Where?"

"Climbing over the wall," he said.

"Jesus wept!" the Captain said, and swung around to order his men in pursuit.

"I said to her," Gomm was prattling. "I said, you'll break your neck climbing over the wall. You'd be better waiting until they open the gate -"

Open the gate. He wasn't such a lunatic, after all. Phillipenko -" the Captain said," – escort Harvey back to his dormitory -"

Gomm protested. "I don't need a bed-time story, thank you."

"Go with him."

The guard crossed to H. G. and escorted him away. The Captain lingered long enough to murmur, "Who's a clever boy, Sidney?" under his breath, then followed. The courtyard was empty again, but for the moonlight, and the map of the world.

Vanessa waited until every last sound had died, and then slipped out of hiding, taking the route the dispatched guards had followed. It led her, eventually, into an area she vaguely recognized from her walk with Guillemot. Encouraged, she hurried on along a passageway which let out into the yard with Our Lady of the Electric Eyes. She crept along the wall, and ducked beneath the statue's gaze and out, finally, to meet the gates. They were indeed open. As the old man had

protested when they'd first met, security was woefully inadequate, and she thanked God for it. As she ran towards the gates she heard the sound of boots on the gravel, and glanced over her shoulder to see the Captain, rifle in hand, stepping from behind the tree.

"Some chocolate, Mrs. Jape?" said Mr. Klein.

This is a lunatic asylum," she told him when they had escorted her back to the interrogation room. "Nothing more nor less. You've no right to hold me here." He ignored her complaints.

"You spoke to Gomm," he said, “and he to you."

"What if he did?"

"What did he tell you?"

"I said: what if he did?"

"And I said: what did he tell you? Klein roared. She would not have guessed him capable of such apoplexy. "I want to know, Mrs. Jape."

Much against her will she found herself shaking at his outburst.

"He told me nonsense," she replied. "He's insane. I think you're all insane."

"What nonsense did he tell you?"

"It was rubbish."

"I'd like to know, Mrs. Jape," Klein said, his fury abating. "Humour me."

"He said there was some kind of committee at work here, that made decisions about world politics, and that he was one of them. That was it, for what it's worth."

"And?"

"And I gently told him he was out of his mind."

Mr. Klein forged a smile. "Of course, this is a complete fiction," he said.

"Of course," said Vanessa. "Jesus Christ, don't treat me like an imbecile, Mr. Klein. I'm a grown woman -” "Mr. Gomm -”

"He said he was a professor."

"Another delusion. Mr. Gomm is a paranoid schizophrenic. He can be extremely dangerous, given half a chance. You were pretty lucky."

"And the others?"

"Others?"

"He's not alone. I've heard them. Are they all schizophrenics?"

Klein sighed. "They're all deranged, though their conditions vary. And in their time, unlikely as it may seem, they've all been killers." He paused to allow this information to sink in. "Some of them multiple killers. That's why they have this place to themselves, hidden away. That's why the officers are armed -"

Vanessa opened her mouth to ask why they were required to masquerade as nuns, but Klein was not about to give her an opportunity.

"Believe me, it's as inconvenient for me as it is irritating for you to be here," he said.

"Then let me go."

"When my investigations are complete," he said. "In the meanwhile your cooperation would be appreciated. If Mr. Gomm or any of the other patients tries to co-opt you into some plan or other, please report them to me immediately. Will you do that?"

"I suppose -"

"And please refrain from any further escape attempts. The next one could prove fatal."

"I wanted to ask -"

"Tomorrow, maybe," Mr. Klein said, glancing at his watch as he stood up. "For now: sleep."

Which, she debated with herself when that sleep refused to come, of all the routes to the truth that lay before her, was the unlikeliest path? She had been given several alternatives: by Gomm, by Klein, by her own common sense. All of them were temptingly improbable. All, like the path that had brought her here, unmarked as to their final destination. She had suffered the consequence of her perversity in

following that track of course; here she was, weary and battered, locked up with little hope of escape. But that perversity was her nature – perhaps, as Ronald had once said, the one indisputable fact about her. If she disregarded that instinct now, despite all it had brought her to, she was lost. She lay awake, turning the available alternatives over in her head. By morning she had made up her mind.

She waited all day, hoping Gomm would come, but she wasn't surprised when he failed to show. It was possible that events of the previous evening had landed him in deeper trouble than even he could talk his way out of. She was not left entirely to herself however. Guillemot came and went, with food, with drink and – in the middle of the afternoon – with playing cards. She picked up the gist of five-card poker quite rapidly, and they passed a contented hour or two playing, while the air carried shouts from the courtyard where the bedlamites were racing frogs. "Do you think you could arrange for me to have a bath, or at least a shower?" she asked him when he came back for her dinner tray that evening. "It's getting so that I don't like my own company."

He actually smiled as he responded. "I'll find out for you."

"Would you?" she gushed. "That's very kind."

He returned an hour later to tell her that dispensation had been sought and granted; would she like to accompany him to the showers?

"Are you going to scrub my back?" she casually enquired.

Guillemot's eyes flickered with panic at the remark, and his ears flushed beetroot red. "Please follow me," he said. Obediently, she followed, trying to keep a mental picture of their route should she want to retrace it later, without her custodian.

The facilities he brought her to were far from primitive, and she regretted, walking into the mirrored bathroom, that actually washing was not high on her list of priorities. Never mind; cleanliness was for another day. "I'll be outside the door," Guillemot said.

"That's reassuring," she replied, offering him a look she trusted he would interpret as promising, and closed the door. Then she ran the shower as hot as it would go, until steam began to cloud the room, and went down on her hands and knees to soap the floor. When the bathroom was sufficiently veiled and the floor sufficiently slick, she called Guillemot. She might have been flattered by the speed of his response, but she was too busy stepping behind him as he fumbled in

the steam, and giving him a hefty push. He slid on the floor, and stumbled against the shower, yelping as scalding water met his scalp. His automatic rifle clattered to the floor, and by the time he was righting himself she had it in her hand, and pointed at his torso, a substantial target. Though she was no sharp-shooter, and her hands were trembling, a blind woman couldn't have missed at such a range; she knew it, and so did Guillemot. He put his hands up.

"Don't shoot."

"If you move a muscle -"

"Please… don't shoot."

"Now… you're going to take me to Mr. Gomm and the others. Quickly and quietly."

"Why?"

"Just take me," she said, gesturing with the rifle that he should lead the way out of the bathroom. "And if you try to do anything clever, I'll shoot you in the back," she said. "I know it's not very manly, but then I'm not a man. I'm just an unpredictable woman. So treat me very carefully."

"… yes."

He did as he was told, meekly, leading her out of the building and through a series of passageways which took them – or so she guessed – towards the bell-tower and the complex that clustered about it. She had always assumed this, the heart of the fortress, to be a chapel. She could not have been more wrong. The outer shell might be tiled roof and white-washed walls, but that was merely a facade; they stepped over the threshold into a concrete maze more reminiscent of a bunker than a place of worship. It briefly occurred to her that the place had been built to withstand a nuclear attack, an impression reinforced by the fact that the corridors all led down. If this was an asylum, it was built to house some rare lunatics.

"What is this place?" she asked Guillemot.

"We call it the Boudoir," he said. "It's where everything happens."

There was little happening at present; most of the offices off the corridors were in darkness. In one room a computer calculated its chances of independent thought, unattended; in another a telex

machine wrote love-letters to itself. They descended into the bowels of the place unchallenged, until, rounding a corner, they came face to face with a woman on her hands and knees, scrubbing the linoleum. The encounter startled both parties, and Guillemot was swift to take the initiative. He knocked Vanessa sideways against the wall, and ran for it. Before she had time to get him in her sights, he was gone.

She cursed herself. It would be moments only before alarm bells started to ring, and guards came running. She was lost if she stayed where she was. The three exits from this hallway looked equally unpromising, so she simply made for the nearest, leaving the cleaner to stare after her. The route she took proved to be another adventure. It led her through a series of rooms, one of which was lined with dozens of clocks, all showing different times; the next of which contained upwards of fifty black telephones; the third and largest was lined on every side with television screens. They rose, one upon another, from floor to ceiling. All but one was blank. The exception to this rule was showing what she first took to be a mud-wrestling contest, but was in fact a poorly reproduced pornographic film. Sitting watching it, sprawled on a chair with a beer-can balanced on his stomach, was a mustachioed nun. He stood up as she entered: caught in the act. She pointed the rifle at him.

"I'm going to shoot you dead," she told him.

"Shit."

"Where's Gomm and the others?"

"What?"

"Where are they?" she demanded. "Quickly?

"Down the hall. Turn left and left again," he said. Then added, "I don't want to die."

"Then sit down and shut up," she replied.

"Thank God," he said.

"Why don't you?" she told him. As she backed out of the room he fell down on his knees, while the mud-wrestlers cavorted behind him.

Left and left again. The directions were fruitful: they led her to a series of rooms. She was just about to knock on one of the doors when the alarm sounded. Throwing caution to the wind she pushed all the

doors open. Voices from within complained at being woken, and asked what the alarm was ringing for. In the third room she found Gomm. He grinned at her.

"Vanessa," he said, bounding out into the corridor. He was wearing a long vest, and nothing else. "You came, eh? You came!"

The others were appearing from their rooms, bleary with sleep. Ireniya, Floyd, Mottershead, Goldberg. She could believe – looking at their raddled faces – that they indeed had four hundred years between them. "Wake up, you old buggers," Gomm said. He had found a pair of trousers and was pulling them on. "The alarm's ringing -" one commented. His hair, which was bright white, was almost at his shoulders. "They'll be here soon -" Ireniya said.

"No matter," Gomm replied.

Floyd was already dressed. "I'm ready," he announced.

"But we're outnumbered," Vanessa protested. "We'll never get out alive."

"She's right," said one, squinting at her. "It's no use."

"Shut up, Goldberg," Gomm snapped. "She's got a gun, hasn't she?"

"One," said the white-haired individual. This must be Mottershead. "One gun against all of them." "I'm going back to bed," Goldberg said.

"This is a chance to escape," Gomm said. "Probably the only chance we'll ever get."

"He's right," the woman said.

"And what about the games?" Goldberg reminded them.

"Forget the games," Floyd told the other, "let them stew a while."

"It's too late," said Vanessa. "They're coming." There were shouts from both ends of the corridor. "We're trapped." "Good," said Gomm.

"You are insane," she told him plainly.

"You can still shoot us," he replied, grinning.

Floyd grunted. "I don't want to get out of here that much," he said.

"Threaten it! Threaten it!" Gomm said. "Tell them if they try anything you'll shoot us all!"

Ireniya smiled. She had left her teeth in her bedroom. "You're not just a pretty face," she said to Gomm. "He's right," said Floyd, beaming now. "They wouldn't dare risk us. They'll have to let us go." "You're out of your minds," Goldberg muttered. "There's nothing out there for us…" He returned into his room and slammed the door. Even as he did so the corridor was blocked off at either end by a mass of guards. Gomm took hold of Vanessa's rifle and raised it to point at his heart.

"Be gentle," he hissed, and threw her a kiss.

"Put down the weapon, Mrs. Jape," said a familiar voice. Mr. Klein had appeared amongst the throng of guards. Take it from me, you are completely surrounded."

"I'll kill them all," Vanessa said, a little hesitantly. Then again, this time with mo re feeling: "I'm warning you. I'm desperate. I'll kill them all before you shoot me."

"I see…" said Klein quietly. "And why should you assume that I give a damn whether you kill them or not? They're insane. I told you that: all lunatics, killers…"

"We both know that isn't true," said Vanessa, gaining confidence from the anxiety on Klein's face. "I want the front gates opened, and the key in the ignition of my car. If you try anything stupid, Mr. Klein, I will systematically shoot these hostages. Now dismiss your bully-boys and do as I say."

Mr. Klein hesitated, then signaled a general withdrawal.

Gomm's eyes glittered. "Nicely done," he whispered.

"Why don't you lead the way?" Vanessa suggested. Gomm did as he was instructed, and her small party snaked their way out past the massed clocks and telephones and video screens. Every step they took Vanessa expected a bullet to find her, but Mr. Klein was clearly too concerned for the health of the ancients to risk calling her bluff. They reached the open air without incident.

The guards were in evidence outside, though attempting to stay out of sight. Vanessa kept the rifle trained on the four captives as they headed through the yards to where her car was parked. The gates had been opened. "Gomm," she whispered. "Open the car doors."

Gomm did so. He had said that age had shrunk them all, and perhaps that was true, but there were five of them to fit into the small vehicle, and it was tightly packed. Vanessa was the last to get in. As she ducked to slide into the driving seat a shot rang out, and she felt a blow to her shoulder. She dropped the rifle.

"Bastards," said Gomm.

"Leave her," somebody piped up in the back, but Gomm was already out of the car and bundling her into the back beside Floyd. He then slid into the driving seat himself and started the engine.

"Can you drive?" Ireniya demanded.

"Of course I can bloody drive!" he retorted, and the car jerked forward through the gates, the gears grating. Vanessa had never been shot before, and hoped – if she survived this episode – to avoid it happening again. The wound in her shoulder was bleeding badly. Floyd did his best to staunch the wound, but Gomm's driving made any really constructive help practically impossible.

There's a track -" she managed to tell him, "off that way."

"Which way's that way? Gomm yelled.

"Right! Right!" she yelled back.

Gomm took both hands off the wheel and looked at them.

"Which is right?

"For Christ's sake-"

Ireniya, in the seat beside him, pressed his hands back onto the wheel. The car performed a tarantella. Vanessa groaned with every bump.

"I see it!" said Gomm. "I see the track!" He revved the car up, and put his foot on the accelerator. One of the back doors, which had been inadequately secured, flipped open and Vanessa almost fell out. Mottershead, reaching over Floyd, yanked her back to safety, but before they could close the door it met the boulder that marked the convergence of the two tracks. The car bucked as the door was torn off its hinges.

"We needed more air in here," said Gomm, and drove on.

Theirs was not the only engine disturbing the Aegean night. There were lights behind them, and the sound of hectic pursuit. With Guillemot's rifle left in the convent, they had no sudden death to bargain with, and Klein knew it. "Step on it!" Floyd said, grinning from ear to ear. "They're coming after us."

"I'm going as fast as I can," Gomm insisted.

Turn off the lights," Ireniya suggested. "It'll make us less of a target."

Then I won't be able to see the track," Gomm complained over the roar of the engine.

"So what? You're not driving on it anyhow."

Mottershead laughed, and so – against her better instincts – did Vanessa. Maybe the loss of blood was making her irresponsible, but she couldn't help herself. Four Methuselahs and herself in a three-door car driving around in the dark: only a madman would have taken this seriously. And there was the final and incontestable proof that these people weren't the lunatics Klein had marked them as, for they saw the humour in it too. Gomm had even taken to singing as he drove: snatches of Verdi, and a falsetto rendering of "Over the Rainbow'.

And if – as her dizzied mind had concluded – these were creatures as sane as herself, then what of the tale that Gomm had told?; was that true too? W as it possible that Armageddon had been kept at bay by these few giggling geriatrics? They're gaining on us!" Floyd said. He was on his knees on the back seat, peering out of the window. "We're not going to make it," Mottershead observed, his laughter barely abating. "We're all going to die." "There!" Ireniya yelled. There's another track! Try that! Try that!"

Gomm swung the wheel, and the car almost tipped over as it swung off the main track and followed this new route. With the lights extinguished it was impossible to see more than a glimmer of the road ahead, but Gomm's style was not about to be cramped by such minor considerations. He revved the car until the engine fairly screeched. Dust was flung up and through the gap where the door had been; a goat fled from the path ahead seconds before losing its life. "Where are we going?" Vanessa yelled.

"Haven't a clue," Gomm returned. "Have you?

Wherever they were heading, they were going at a fair speed. This track was flatter than the one they'd left, and Gomm was taking full

advantage of the fact. Again, he'd taken to singing.

Mottershead was leaning out of the window on the far side of the car, his hair streaming, watching for their pursuers. "We're losing them!" he howled triumphantly. "We're losing them!"

A common exhilaration seized all the travelers now, and they began to sing along with H.G. They were singing so loudly that Gomm couldn't hear Mottershead inform him that the road ahead seemed to disappear. Indeed H.G. was not aware that he had driven the car over the cliff until the vehicle took a nose-dive, and the sea came up to meet them.

"Mrs. Jape? Mrs. Jape?"

Vanessa woke unwillingly. Her head hurt, her arm hurt. There had been some terrible times recently, though it took her a while to remember the substance of them. Then the memories came back. The car pitching over the cliff; the cold sea rushing in through the open door; the frantic cries around her as the vehicle sank. She had struggled free, only half conscious, vaguely aware that Floyd was floating up beside her. She had said his name, but he had not answered. She said it again, now.

"Dead," said Mr. Klein. They're all dead."

"Oh my God," she murmured. She was looking not at his face but at a chocolate stain on his waistcoat. "Never mind them now," he insisted.

"Never mind?"

"There's more important business, Mrs. Jape. You must get up, and quickly."

The urgency in Klein's voice brought Vanessa to her feet. "Is it morning?" she said. There were no windows in the room they occupied. This was the Boudoir, to judge by its concrete walls.

"Yes, it's morning," Klein replied, impatiently. "Now, will you come with me? I have something to show you." He opened the door and they stepped out into the grim corridor. A little way ahead it sounded as if a major argument was going on; dozens of raised voices, imprecations and pleadings.

"What's happening?"

They're warming up for the Apocalypse," he replied, and led the way into the room where Vanessa had last seen the mud-wrestlers. Now all of the video-screens were buzzing, and each displayed a different interior. There were war rooms and presidential suites, Cabinet Offices and Halls of Congress. In every one of them, somebody was shouting. "You've been unconscious two full days," Klein told her, as if this went some way to explaining the cacophony. Her head ached already. She looked from screen to screen: from Washington to Hamburg to Sydney to Rio de Janeiro. Everywhere around the globe the mighty were waiting for news. But the oracles were dead.

They're just performers," Klein said, gesturing at the shouting screens. They couldn't run a three-legged race, never mind the world. They're getting hysterical, and they're button-fingers are starting to itch."

"What am I supposed to do about it?" Vanessa returned. This tour of Babel depressed her. "I'm no strategist." "Neither were Gomm and the others. They might have been, once upon a time, but things soon fell apart." "Systems decay," she said.

"Isn't that the truth. By the time I came here half the committee were already dead. And the rest had lost all interest in their duties -”

"But they still provided judgements, as H.G. said?"

"Oh yes."

They ruled the world?"

"After a fashion," Klein replied.

"What do you mean: after a fashion?"

Klein looked at the screens. His eyes seemed to be on the verge of spilling tears.

"Didn't he explain,? They played games, Mrs. Jape. When they became bored with sweet reason and the sound of their own voices, they gave up debate and took to flipping coins."

"No."

"And racing frogs of course. That was always a favourite."

"But the governments -” she protested," – surely they didn't just

accept -”

"You think they care?" Klein said, "As long as they're in the public eye what does it matter to them what verbiage they're spouting, or how it was arrived at?"

Her head spun. "All chance?" she said.

"Why not? It has a very respectable tradition. Nations have fallen on decisions divined from the entrails of sheep." "It's preposterous."

"I agree. But I ask you, in all honesty, is it many more terrifying than leaving the power in their hands?" He pointed to the rows of irate faces. Democrats sweating that the morrow find them without causes to espouse or applause to win; despots in terror that without instruction their cruelties would lose favour and be overturned. One premier seemed to have suffered a bronchial attack and was being supported by two of his aides; another clutched a revolver and was pointing it at the screen, demanding satisfaction; a third was chewing his toupe. Were these the finest fruit of the political tree?; babbling, bullying, cajoling idiots, driven to apoplexy because nobody would tell them which way to jump? There wasn't a man or woman amongst them Vanessa would have trusted to guide her across the road. "Better the frogs," she murmured, bitter thought that it was.

The light in the courtyard, after the dead illumination of the bunker, was dazzlingly bright, but Vanessa was pleased to be out of earshot of the stridency within. They would find a new committee very soon, Klein had told her as they made their way out into the open air: it would be a matter of weeks only before equilibrium was restored. In the meanwhile, the earth could be blown to smithereens by the desperate creatures she had just seen. They needed judgements, and quickly.

"Goldberg is still alive," Klein said. "And he will go on with the games; but it takes two to play." "Why not you?"

"Because he hates me. Hates all of us. He says that he'll only play with you."

Goldberg was sitting under the laurel trees, playing patience. It was a slow business. His shortsightedness required him to bring each card to within three inches of his nose to read it, and by the time he had got to the end of the line he had forgotten those cards at the beginning.

"She's agreed," said Klein. Goldberg didn't look up from his game. "I said: she's agreed."

"I'm blind, not deaf," Goldberg told Klein, still perusing the cards. When he eventually looked up it was to squint at Vanessa. "I told them it would end badly…" he said softly, and Vanessa knew that beneath this show of fatalism he felt the loss of his companions acutely."… I said from the beginning, we were here to stay. No use to escape." He shrugged, and returned to the cards. "What's to escape to? The world's changed. I know. We changed it." "It wasn't so bad," Vanessa said.

"The world?"

They way they died."

"Ah."

"We were enjoying ourselves, until the last minute."

"Gomm was such a sentimentalist," Goldberg said. "We never much liked each other."

A large frog jumped into Vanessa's path. The movement caught Goldberg's eye.

"Who is it?" he said.

The creature regarded Vanessa's foot balefully. "Just a frog," she replied.

"What does it look like?"

"It's fat," she said. "With three red dots on its back."

"That's Israel," he told her. "Don't tread on him."

"Could we have some decisions by noon?" Klein butted in. "Particularly the Gulf situation, and the Mexican dispute, and -"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Goldberg. "Now go away."

" – We could have another Bay of Pigs -"

"You're telling me nothing I don't know. Go! You're disturbing the nations." He peered at Vanessa. "Well, are you going to sit down or not?"

She sat.

"I'll leave you to it." Klein said, and retreated.

Goldberg had begun to make a sound in his throat -”kek-kek-kek' - imitating the voice of a frog. In response, there came a croaking from every corner of the courtyard. Hearing the sound, Vanessa stifled a smile. Farce, she had told herself once before, had to be played with a straight face, as though you believed every outrageous word. Only tragedy demanded laughter; and that, with the aid of the frogs, they might yet prevent.

XXV: IN THE FLESH

When Cleveland Smith returned to his cell after the interview with the Landing Officer, his new bunk mate was already in residence, staring at the dust-infested sunlight through the reinforced glass window. It was a short display; for less than half an hour each afternoon (clouds permitting) the sun found its way between the wall and the administration building and edged its way along the side of B Wing, not to appear again until the following day. "You're Tait?" Cleve said.

The prisoner looked away from the sun. Mayflower had said the new boy was twenty-two, but Tait looked five years younger. He had the face of a lost dog. An ugly dog, at that; a dog left by its owners to play in traffic. Eyes too skinned, mouth too soft, arms too slender: a born victim. Cleve was irritated to have been lumbered with the boy. Tait was dead weight, and he had no energies to expend on the boy's protection, despite Mayflower's pep-talk about extending a welcoming hand.

"Yes," the dog replied. "William."

"People call you William?"

"No," the boy said. "They call me Billy."

"Billy." Cleve nodded, and stepped into the cell. The regime at Pentonville was relatively enlightened; cells were left open for two hours in the mornings, and often two in the afternoon, allowing the cons some freedom of movement. The arrangement had its disadvantages, however, which was where Mayflower's talk came in. "I've been told to give you some advice."

"Oh?" the boy replied.

"You've not done time before?"

"No."

"Not even borstal?"

Tait's eyes flickered. "A little."

"So you know what the score is. You know you're easy meat."

"Sure."

"Seems I've been volunteered," Cleve said without appetite, “to keep you from getting mauled." Tait stared at Cleve with eyes the blue of which was milky, as though the sun was still in them. "Don't put yourself out," the boy said. "You don't owe me anything."

"Damn right I don't. But it seems I got a social responsibility." Cleve said sourly. "And you're it."

Cleve was two months into his sentence for handling marijuana; his third visit to Pentonville. At thirty years of age he was far from obsolete. His body was solid, his face lean and refined; in his court suit he could have passed for a lawyer at ten yards. A little closer, and the viewer might catch the scar on his neck, the result of an attack by a penniless addict, and a certain wariness in his gait, as if with every step forward he was keeping the option of a speedy retreat.

You're still a young man, the last judge had told him, you still have time to change your spots. He hadn't disagreed out loud, but Cleve knew in his heart he was a leopard born and bred. Crime was easy, work was not. Until somebody proved otherwise he would do what he did best, and take the consequences if caught. Doing time wasn't so unpalatable, if you had the right attitude to it. The food was edible, the company select; as long as he had something to keep his mind occupied he was content enough. At present he was reading about sin. Now there was a subject. In his time he'd heard so many explanations of how it had come into the world; from probation officers and lawyers and priests. Theories sociological, theological, ideological. Some were worthy of a few minutes' consideration. Most were so absurd (sin from the womb; sin from the state) he laughed in their apologists' faces. None held water for long.

It was a good bone to chew over, though. He needed a problem to occupy the days. And nights; he slept badly in prison. It wasn't his guilt that kept him awake, but that of others. He was, after all, just a hash-pusher, supplying wherever there was a demand: a minor cog in the consumerist machine; he had nothing to feel guilty about. But there were others here, many others it seemed, whose dreams were not so benevolent, nor nights so peaceful. They would cry, they would complain; they would curse judges local and celestial. Their din would have kept the dead awake.

"Is it always like this?" Billy asked Cleve after a week or so. A new inmate was making a ruckus down the landing: one moment tears, the

next obscenities.

"Yes. Most of the time," said Cleve. "Some of them need to yell a bit. It keeps their minds from curdling." "Not you," observed the unmusical voice from the bunk below, “you just read your books and keep out of harm's way. I've watched you. It doesn't bother you, does it?"

"I can live with it," Cleve replied. "I got no wife to come here every week and remind me what I'm missing." "You been in before?"

Twice."

The boy hesitated an instant before saying, "I suppose you know your way around the place, do you?" "Well, I'm not writing a guidebook, but I got the general lay-out by now." It seemed an odd comment for the boy to make. "Why?"

"I just wondered," said Billy.

"You got a question?"

Tait didn't answer for several seconds, then said: "I heard they used to… used to hang people here." Whatever Cleve had been expecting the boy to come out with, that wasn't it. But then he had decided several days back that Billy Tait was a strange one. Sly, side-long glances from those milky-blue eyes; a way he had of staring at the wall or at the window like a detective at a murder-scene, desperate for clues.

Cleve said, "There used to be a hanging shed, I think."

Again, silence; and then another enquiry, dropped as lightly as the boy could contrive. "Is it still standing?" "The shed? I don't know. They don't hang people any more, Billy, or hadn't you heard?" There was no reply from below. "What's it to you, anyhow?"

"Just curious."

Billy was right; curious he was. So odd, with his vacant stares and his solitary manner, that most of the men kept clear of him. Only Lowell took any interest in him, and his motives for that were unequivocal. "You want to lend me your lady for the afternoon?" he asked Cleve while they waited in line for breakfast. Tait, who stood within earshot, said nothing; neither did Cleve.

"You hear me? I asked you a question."

"I heard. You leave him alone."

"Share and share alike," Lowell said. "I can do you some favours. We can work something out." "He's not available."

"Well, why don't I ask him?" Lowell said, grinning through his beard. "What do you say, baby?" Tait looked round at Lowell.

"I say no thank you."

"No thank you," Lowell said, and gave Cleve a second smile, this quite without humour. "You've got him well trained. Does he sit up and beg, too?"

Take a walk, Lowell," Cleve replied. "He's not available and that's all there is to it."

"You can't keep your eyes on him every minute of the day," Lowell pointed out. "Sooner or later he's going to have to stand on his own two feet. Unless he's better kneeling."

The innuendo won a guffaw from Lowell's cell-mate, Nayler. Neither were men Cleve would have willingly faced in a free-for-all, but his skills as a bluffer were honed razor-sharp, and he used them now.

"You don't want to trouble yourself," he told Lowell, “you can only cover so many scars with a beard." Lowell looked at Cleve, all humour fled. He clearly couldn't distinguish the truth from bluff, and equally clearly wasn't willing to put his neck on the line.

"Just don't look the other way." he said, and said no more.

The encounter at breakfast wasn't mentioned until that night, when the lights had been extinguished. It was Billy who brought it up.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said. "Lowell's a bad bastard. I've heard the talk."

"You want to get raped then, do you?"

"No," he said quickly, "Christ no. I got to be fit."

"You'll be fit for nothing if Lowell gets his hands on you."

Billy slipped out from his bunk and stood in the middle of the cell, barely visible in the gloom. "I suppose you want something in return," he said.

Cleve turned on his pillow and looked at the uncertain silhouette standing a yard from him. "What have you got that I'd want, Billy-Boy?" he said.

"What Lowell wanted."

"Is that what you think that bluster was all about? Me staking my claim?"

"Yeah."

"Like you said: no thank you." Cleve rolled over again to face the wall.

"I didn't mean -"

"I don't care what you meant. I just don't want to hear about it, all right? You stay out of Lowell's way, and don't give me shit."

"Hey," Billy murmured, "don't get like that, please. Please. You're the only friend I've got."

"I'm nobody's friend," Cleve said to the wall. "I just don't want any inconvenience. Understand me?" "No inconvenience," the boy repeated, dull-tongued.

"Right. Now… I need my beauty sleep."

Tait said no more, but returned to the bottom bunk, and lay down, the springs creaking as he did so. Cleve lay in silence, turning the exchange over in his head. He had no wish to lay hands on the boy; but perhaps he had made his point too harshly. Well, it was done.

From below he could hear Billy murmuring to himself, almost inaudibly. He strained to eavesdrop on what the boy was saying. It took several seconds of ear-pricking attention before Cleve realized that Billy-Boy was saying his prayers.

Cleve dreamt that night. What of, he couldn't remember in the morning, though as he showered and shaved tantalizing grains of the dream sifted through his head. Scarcely ten minutes went by that morning without something – salt overturned on the breakfast table, or the sound of shouts in the exercise yard – promising to break his dream: but the revelation did not come. It left him uncharacteristically edgy and short-tempered. When Wesley, a small-time forger whom he knew from his previous vacation here, approached him in the library

and started to talk as though they were bosom pals, Cleve told the runt to shut up. But Wesley insisted on speaking. "You got trouble."

"Oh. How so?"

"That boy of yours. Billy."

"What about him?"

"He's asking questions. He's getting pushy. People don't like it. They're saying you should take him in hand." "I'm not his keeper."

Wesley pulled a face. "I'm telling you; as a friend."

"Spare me."

"Don't be stupid, Cleveland. You're making enemies."

"Oh?" said Cleve. "Name one."

"Lowell," Wesley said, quick as a flash. "Nayler for another. All kinds of people. They don't like the way Tait is." "And how is he?" Cleve snapped back.

Wesley made a small grunt of protest. "I'm just trying to tell you," he said. "He's sly. Like a fucking rat. There'll be trouble."

"Spare me the prophecies."

The law of averages demands the worst prophet be right some of the time: this was Wesley's moment it seemed. The day after, coming back from the Workshop where he'd exercised his intellect putting wheels on plastic cars, Cleve found Mayflower waiting for him on the landing.

"I asked you to look after William Tait, Smith," the officer said. "Don't you give a damn?"

"What's happened?"

"No, I suppose you don't."

"I asked what happened. Sir."

"Nothing much. Not this time. He's banged about, that's all. Seems Lowell has a hankering after him. Am I right?" Mayflower peered at Cleve, and when he got no response went on: "I made an error with

you, Smith. I thought there was something worth appealing to under the hard man. My mistake."

Billy was lying on the bunk, his face bruised, his eyes closed. He didn't open them when Cleve came in. "You OK?" "Sure," the boy said softly.

"No bones broken?"

"I'll survive."

"You've got to understand -”

"Listen." Billy opened his eyes. The pupils had darkened somehow, or that was the trick the light performed with them. "I'm alive, OK? I'm not an idiot you know. I knew what I was letting myself in for, coming here." He spoke as if he'd had a choice in the matter. "I can take Lowell," he went on, “so don't fret." He paused, then said: "You were right."

"About what?"

"About not having friends. I'm on my own, you're on your own. Right? I'm just a slow learner; but I'm getting the hang of it." He smiled to himself.

"You've been asking questions," Cleve said.

"Oh, yeah?" Billy replied off-handedly. "Who says?"

"If you've got questions, ask me. People don't like snoopers. They get suspicious. And then they turn their backs when Lowell and his like get heavy."

Naming the man brought a painful frown to Billy's face. He touched his bruised cheek. "He's dead," the boy murmured, almost to himself.

"Some chance," Cleve commented.

The look that Tait returned could have sliced steel. "I mean it," he said, without a trace of doubt in his voice. "Lowell won't get out alive."

Cleve didn't comment; the boy needed this show of bravado, laughable as it was.

"What do you want to know, that you go snooping around?"

"Nothing much," Billy replied. He was no longer looking at Cleve, but staring at the bunk above. Quietly, he said: "I just wanted to know where the graves were, that was all."

The graves?"

"Where they buried the men they'd hanged. Somebody told me there's a rose-bush where Crippen's buried. You ever hear that?"

Cleve shook his head. Only now did he remember the boy asking about the hanging shed; and now the graves. Billy looked up at him. The bruise was ripening by the minute.

"You know where they are, Cleve?" he asked. Again, that feigned nonchalance.

"I could find out, if you do me the courtesy of telling me why you want to know."

Billy looked out from the shelter of the bunk. The afternoon sun was describing its short arc on the painted brick of the cell wall. It was weak today. The boy slid his legs off the bunk and sat on the edge of the mattress, staring at the light as he had on that first day.

"My grandfather – that is, my mother's father – was hanged here," he said, his voice raw. "In 1937. Edgar Tait. Edgar St Clair Tait."

"I thought you said your mother's father?"

"I took his name. I didn't want my father's name. I never belonged to him."

"Nobody belongs to anybody." Cleve replied. "You're your own man."

"But that's not true," Billy said with a tiny shrug, still staring at the light on the wall. His certainty was immovable; the gentility with which he spoke did not undercut the authority of the statement. "I belong to my grandfather. I always have."

"You weren't even born when he -"

"That doesn't matter. Coming and going; that's nothing."

Coming and going, Cleve puzzled; did Tait mean life and death? He had no chance to ask. Billy was talking again, the same subdued but insistent flow.

"He was guilty of course. Not the way they thought he was, but guilty. He knew what he was and what he was capable of; that's guilt, isn't it? He killed four people. Or at least that's what they hanged him for." "You mean he killed more?"

Billy made another small shrug: numbers didn't matter apparently. "But nobody came to see where they'd laid him to rest. That's not right, is it? They didn't care, I suppose. All the family were glad he was gone, probably. Thought he was wrong in the head from the beginning. But he wasn't. I know he wasn't. I've got his hands, and his eyes. So Mam said. She told me all about him, you see, just before she died. Told me things she'd never told anybody, and only told me because of my eyes…" he faltered, and put his hand to his lip, as if the fluctuating light on the brick had already mesmerised him into saying too much.

"What did your mother tell you?" Cleve pressed him.

Billy seemed to weigh up alternative responses before offering one. "Just that he and I were alike in some ways," he said.

"Crazy, you mean?" Cleve said, only half-joking.

"Something like that," Billy replied, eyes still on the wall. He sighed, then allowed himself a further confession. "That's why I came here. So my grandfather would know he hadn't been forgotten."

"Came here?" said Cleve. "What are you talking about? You were caught and sentenced. You had no choice." The light on the wall was extinguished as a cloud passed over the sun. Billy looked up at Cleve. The light was there, in his eyes.

"I committed a crime to get here," the boy replied. "It was a deliberate act."

Cleve shook his head. The claim was preposterous.

"I tried before: twice. It's taken time. But I got here, didn't I?"

"Don't take me for a fool, Billy," Cleve warned.

"I don't," the other replied. He stood up now. He seemed somehow lighter for the story he'd told; he even smiled, if tentatively, as he said: "You've been good to me. Don't think I don't know that. I'm grateful. Now -" he faced Cleve before saying: "I want to know where the graves are. Find that out and you won't hear another peep from me, I

promise."

Cleve knew next to nothing about the prison or its history, but he knew somebody who did. There was a man by the name of Bishop -so familiar to the inmates that his name had acquired the definite article – who was often at the Workshop at the same time as Cleve. The Bishop had been in and out of prison for much of his forty odd years, mostly for minor misdemeanours, and – with all the fatalism of a one-legged man who makes a life-study of monopedia – had become an expert on prisons and the penal system. Little of his information came from books. He had gleaned the bulk of his knowledge from old lags and screws who wanted to talk the hours away, and by degrees he had turned himself into a walking encyclopedia on crime and punishment. He had made it his trade, and he sold his carefully accrued knowledge by the sentence; sometimes as geographical information to the would-be escapee, sometimes as prison mythology to the godless con in search of a local divinity. Now Cleve sought him out, and laid down his payment in tobacco and IOUs.

"What can I do for you?" The Bishop asked. He was heavy, but not unhealthily so. The needle-thin cigarettes he was perpetually rolling and smoking were dwarfed by his butcher's fingers, stained sepia by nicotine. "I want to know about the hangings here."

The Bishop smiled. "Such good stories," he said; and began to tell.

On the plain details, Billy had been substantially correct. There had been hangings in Pentonville up until the middle of the century, but the shed had long since been demolished. On the spot now stood the Probation Office in B Wing. As to the story of Crippen's roses, there was truth in that too. In front of a hut in the grounds, which, The Bishop informed Cleve, was a store for gardening equipment, was a small patch of grass, in the centre of which a bush flourished, planted (and at this point The Bishop confessed that he could not tell fact from fiction) in memory of Doctor Crippen, hanged in 1910.

"That's where the graves are?" Cleve asked.

"No, no," The Bishop said, reducing half of one of his tiny cigarettes to ash with a single inhalation. The graves are alongside the wall, to the left behind the hut. There's a long lawn; you must have seen it."

"No stones?"

"Absolutely not. The plots have always been left unmarked. Only the Governor knows who's buried where; and he's probably lost the plans."

The Bishop ferreted for his tobacco tin in the breast-pocket of his prison-issue shirt and began to roll another cigarette with such familiarity he scarcely glanced down at what he was doing. "Nobody's allowed to come and mourn you see. Out of sight, out of mind: that's the idea. Of course, that's not the way it works, is it? People forget Prime Ministers, but they remember murderers. You walk on that lawn, and just six feet under are some of the most notorious men who ever graced this green and pleasant land. And not even a cross to mark the spot. Criminal, isn't it?"

"You know who's buried there?"

"Some very wicked gentlemen," the Bishop replied, as if fondly admonishing them for their mischief-mongering. "You heard of a man called Edgar Tait?"

Bishop raised his eyebrows; the fat of his brow furrowed. "Saint Tait? Oh certainly. He's not easily forgotten." "What do you know about him?"

"He killed his wife, and then his children. Took a knife to them all, as I live and breathe."

"All?"

The Bishop put the freshly-rolled cigarette to his thick lips. "Maybe not all," he said, narrowing his eyes as he tried to recall the specific details. "Maybe one of them survived. I think perhaps a daughter…" he shrugged dismissively. "I'm not very good at remembering the victims. But then, who is?" He fixed his bland gaze on Cleve. "Why are you so interested in Tait? He was hanged before the war."

"1937. He'll be well gone, eh?"

The Bishop raised a cautionary fore-finger. "Not so," he said. "You see the land this prison is built upon has special properties. Bodies buried here don't rot the way they do elsewhere." Cleve shot The Bishop an incredulous glance. "It's true," the fat man protested mildly, "I have it on unimpeachable authority. Take it from me, whenever they've had to exhume a body from the plot it's always been found in almost perfect condition." He paused to light his cigarette, and drew upon it, exhaling the smoke through his mouth with his next words. "When the end of the world is upon us, the good men of Marylebone and Camden Town will rise up as rot and bone. But the wicked?; they'll dance to Judgement as fresh as the day they dropped. Imagine that." This perverse notion clearly delighted him. His pudgy face

puckered and dimpled with pleasure at it. "Ah," he mused, "And who'll be calling who corrupt on that fine morning?"

Cleve never worked out precisely how Billy talked his way on to the gardening detail, but he managed it. Perhaps he had appealed directly to Mayflower, who'd persuaded his superiors that the boy could be trusted out in the fresh air. However he worked the maneuver, in the middle of the week following Cleve's discovery of the graves' whereabouts, Billy was out in the cold April morning cutting grass.

What happened that day filtered back down the grapevine around recreation time. Cleve had the story from three independent sources, none of whom had been on the spot. The accounts had a variety of colorations, but were clearly of the same species. The bare bones went as follows: The gardening detail, made up of four men overlooked by a single prison officer, were moving around the blocks, trimming grass and weeding beds in preparation for the spring planting. Custody had been lax, apparently. It was two or three minutes before the officer even noticed that one of his charges had edged to the periphery of the party and slipped away. The alarm was raised. The officers did not have to look far, however. Tait had made no attempt to escape, or if he had he'd been stymied in his bid by a fit of some kind, which had crippled him. He was found (and here the stories parted company considerably) on a large patch of lawn beside the wall, lying on the grass. Some reports claimed he was black in the face, his body knotted up and his tongue all but bitten through; others that he was found face down, talking to the earth, weeping and cajoling. The consensus was that the boy had lost his mind. The rumours made Cleve the centre of attention; a situation he did not relish. For the next day he was scarcely left alone; men wanting to know what it was like to share a cell with a lunatic. He had nothing to tell, he insisted. Tait had been the perfect cell-mate -quiet, undemanding and unquestionably sane. He told the same story to Mayflower when he was grilled the following day; and later, to the prison doctor. He let not a breath of Tait's interest in the graves be known, and made it his business to see The Bishop and request a similar silence of him. The man was willing to oblige only if vouchsafed the full story in due course. This Cleve promised. The Bishop, as befitted his assumed clerity, was as good as his word.

Billy was gone from the fold for two days. In the interim Mayflower disappeared from his duties as Landing Officer. No explanation was given. In his place, a man called Devlin was transferred from D Wing. His reputation went before him. He was not, it seemed, a man of rare compassion. The impression was confirmed when, the day of Billy

Tait's return, Cleve was summoned into Devlin's office.

"I'm told you and Tait are close," Devlin said. He had a face as giving as granite.

"Not really, sir."

"I'm not going to make Mayflower's mistake, Smith. As far as I'm concerned Tait is trouble. I'm going to watch him like a hawk, and when I'm not here you're going to do it for me, understand? If he so much as crosses his eyes it's the ghost train. I'll have him out of here and into a special unit before he can fart. Do I make myself clear?"

"Paying your respects, were you?"

Billy had lost weight in the hospital; pounds his scrawny frame could scarcely afford. His shirt hung off his shoulders; his belt was on its tightest notch. The thinning more than ever emphasized his physical vulnerability; a featherweight blow would floor him, Cleve thought. But it lent his face a new, almost desperate, intensity. He seemed all eyes; and those had lost all trace of captured sunlight. Gone, too, was the pretense of vacuity, replaced with an eerie purposefulness.

"I asked a question."

"I heard you," Billy said. There was no sun today, but he looked at the wall anyway. "Yes, if you must know, I was paying my respects."

"I've been told to watch you, by Devlin. He wants you off the Landing. Transferred entirely, maybe." "Out?" The panicked look Billy gave Cleve was too naked to be met for more than a few seconds. "Away from here, you mean?"

"I would think so."

They can't!"

"Oh, they can. They call it the ghost train. One minute you're here; the next -”

"No," the boy said, hands suddenly fists. He had begun to shake, and for a moment Cleve feared a second fit. But he seemed, by act of will, to control the tremors, and turned his look back to his cellmate. The bruises he'd received from Lowell had dulled to yellow-grey, but far from disappeared; his unshaven cheeks were dusted with pale-ginger

hair. Looking at him Cleve felt an unwelcome twinge of concern. "Tell me." Cleve said. Tell you what?" Billy asked. "What happened at the graves."

"I felt dizzy. I fell over. The next thing I knew I was in hospital."

"That's what you told them, is it?"

"It's the truth."

"Not the way I heard it. Why don't you explain what really happened? I want you to trust me." "I do," the boy said. "But I have to keep this to myself, see. It's between me and him."

"You and Edgar?" Cleve asked, and Billy nodded, "A man who killed all his family but your mother?" Billy was clearly startled that Cleve possessed this information. "Yes," he said, after consideration. "Yes, he killed them all. H e would have killed Mama too, if she hadn't escaped. He wanted to wipe the whole family out. So there'd be no heirs to carry the bad blood."

"Your blood's bad, is it?"

Billy allowed himself the slenderest of smiles. "No," he said. "I don't think so. Grandfather was wrong. Times have changed, haven't they?"

He is mad, Cleve thought. Lightning-swift, Billy caught the judgement.

"I'm not insane," he said. "You tell them that. Tell Devlin and whoever else asks. Tell them I'm a lamb." The fierceness was back in his eyes. There was nothing lamb -like there, though Cleve forbore saying so. "They mustn't move me out, Cleve. Not after getting so close. I've got business here. Important business."

"With a dead man?"

"With a dead man."

Whatever new purpose he displayed for Cleve, the shutters went up when Billy got back amongst the rest of the cons. He responded neither to the questions nor the insults bandied about; his facade of empty-eyed indifference was flawless. Cleve was impressed. The boy had a future as an actor, if he decided to forsake professional lunacy. But the strain of concealing the new-found urgency in him rapidly began to tell. In a hollowness about the eyes, and a jitteriness in his

movements; in brooding and unshakeable silences. The physical deterioration was apparent to the doctor to whom Billy continued to report; he pronounced the boy suffering from depression and acute insomnia, and prescribed sedatives to aid sleep. These pills Billy gave to Cleve, insisting he had no need of them himself. Cleve was grateful. For the first time in many months he began to sleep well, unperturbed by the tears and shouts of his fellow inmates.

By day, the relationship between he and the boy, which had always been vestigial, dwindled to mere courtesy. Cleve sensed that Billy was closing up entirely, removing himself from merely physical concerns.

It was not the first time he had witnessed such a pre-medicated withdrawal. His sister-in-law, Rosanna, had died of stomach cancer three years previous: a protracted and, until the last weeks, steady decline. Cleve had not been close to her, but perhaps that very distance had lent him a perspective on the woman's behaviour that the rest of his family had lacked. He had been startled at the systematic way she had prepared herself for death, drawing in her affections until they touched only the most vital figures in her life -her children and her priest – and exiling all others, including her husband of fourteen years.

Now he saw the same dispassion and frugality in Billy. Like a man in training to cross a waterless wasteland and too possessive of his energies to squander them in a single fruitless gesture, the boy was sinking into himself. It was eerie; Cleve became increasingly uncomfortable sharing the twelve feet by eight of the cell with Billy. It was like living with a man on Death Row.

The only consolation was the tranquillisers, which Billy readily charmed the doctor into continuing to supply. They guaranteed Cleve sleep that was restful, and, for several days at least, dreamless.

And then he dreamt the city.

Not the city first; first the desert. An empty expanse of blue-black sand, which stung the soles of his feet as he walked, and was blown up by a cool wind into his nose and eyes and hair. He had been here before, he knew. His dream-self recognized the vista of barren dunes, with neither tree nor habitation to break the monotony. But on previous visits he had come with guides (or such was his half-formed belief); now he was alone, and the clouds above his head were heavy and slate-grey, promising no sun. For what seemed hours he walked the dunes, his feet turned bloody by the sharp sand, his body, dusted

by the grains, tinged blue. As exhaustion came close to defeating him, he saw ruins, and approached them.

It was no oasis. There was nothing in those empty streets of health or sustenance; no fruitful trees nor sparkling fountains. The city was a conglomeration of houses, or parts of same – sometimes entire floors, sometimes single rooms – thrown down side by side in parodies of urban order. The styles were a hopeless mish-mash – fine Georgian establishments standing beside mean tenement buildings with rooms burnt out; a house plucked from a terraced row, perfect down to the glazed dog on the window sill, back to back with a penthouse suite. All were scarred by a rough removal from their context: walls were cracked, offering sly glimpses into private interiors; staircases beetled cloudward without destination; doors flapped open and closed in the wind, letting on to nowhere. There was life here, Cleve knew. Not just the lizards, rats and butterflies – albinos all – that fluttered and skipped in front of him as he walked the forsaken streets – but human life. He sensed that every step he took was overlooked, though he saw no sign of human presence; not on his first visit at least.

On the second, his dream-self forsook the trudge across the wilderness and was delivered directly into the necropolis, his feet, easily tutored, following the same route as he had on his first visit. The constant wind was stronger tonight. It caught the lace curtains in this window, and a tinkling Chinese trinket hanging in that. It carried voices too; horrid and outlandish sounds that came from some distant place far beyond the city. Hearing that whirring and whittering, as of insane children, he was grateful for the streets and the rooms, for their familiarity if not for any comfort they might offer. He had no desire to step into those interiors, voices or no; did not want to discover what marked these snatches of architecture out that they should have been ripped from their roots and flung down in this whining desolation.

Yet, once he had visited the site, his sleeping mind went back there, night upon night; always walking, bloody-footed, seeing only the rats and the butterflies, and the black sand on each threshold, blowing into rooms and hallways that never changed from visit to visit; that seemed, from what he could glimpse between the curtains or through a shattered wall, to have been fixed somehow at some pivotal moment, with a meal left uneaten on a table set for three (the capon uncarved, the sauces steaming), or a shower left running in a bathroom in which the lamp perpetually swung; and in a room that might have been a lawyer's study a lap-dog, or else a wig torn off and flung to the floor, lying discarded on a fine carpet whose intricacies were half-devoured by sand.

Only once did he see another human being in the city: and that was Billy. It happened strangely. One night – as he dreamed the streets – he half-stirred from sleep. Billy was awake, and standing in the middle of the cell, staring up at the light through the window. It was not moonlight, but the boy bathed in it as if it were. His face was turned up to the window, mouth open and eyes closed. Cleve barely had time to register the trance the boy seemed to be in before the tranquillisers drew him back into his dream. He took a fragment of reality with him however, folding the boy into his sleeping vision. When he reached the city again, there was Billy Tait: standing on the street, his face turned up to the louring clouds, his mouth open, his eyes closed.

The image lingered a moment only. The next, the boy was away, his heels kicking up black fans of sand. Cleve called after him. Billy ran on however, heedless; and, with that inexplicable foreknowledge that dreams bring, Cleve knew where the boy was going. Off to the edge of the city, where the houses petered out and the desert began. Off to meet some friend coming in on that terrible wind, perhaps. Nothing would induce him into pursuit, yet he didn't want to lose contact with the one fellow human he had seen in these destitute streets. He called Billy's name again, more loudly.

This time he felt a hand on his arm, and started up in terror to find himself being jostled awake in his cell. "It's all right," Billy said. "You're dreaming."

Cleve tried to shake the city out of his head, but for several perilous seconds the dream bled into the waking world, and looking down at the boy he saw Billy's hair lifted by a wind that did not, could not, belong in the confines of the cell. "You're dreaming," Billy said again. "Wake up."

Shuddering, Cleve sat fully up on his bunk. The city was receding – was almost gone – but before he lost sight of it entirely he felt the indisputable conviction that Billy knew what he was waking Cleve from; that they had been there together for a few, fragile moments.

"You know, don't you?" he accused the pallid face at his side.

The boy looked bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

Cleve shook his head. The suspicion became more incredible with each step he took from sleep. Even so, when he looked down at Billy's bony hand, which still clung to his arm, he half-expected to see flecks of that obsidian grit beneath his finger-nails. There was only dirt.

The doubts lingered however, long after reason should have bullied them into surrender. Cleve found himself watching the boy more closely from that night on, waiting for some slip of tongue or eye which would reveal the nature of his game. Such scrutiny was a lost cause. The last traces of accessibility disappeared after that night; the boy became – like Rosanna – an indecipherable book, letting no clue as to the nature of his secret world out from beneath his lids. As to the dream – it was not even mentioned again. The only roundabout allusion to that night was Billy's redoubled insistence that Cleve continue to take the sedatives.

"You need your sleep," he said after coming back from the Infirmary with a further supply. "Take them." "You need sleep too," Cleve replied, curious to see how far the boy would push the issue. "I don't need the stuff any more."

"But you do," Billy insisted, proffering the phial of capsules. "You know how bad the noise is." "Someone said they're addictive," Cleve replied, not taking the pills, "I'll do without."

"No," said Billy; and now Cleve sensed a level of insistence which confirmed his deepest suspicions. The boy wanted him drugged, and had all along. "I sleep like a babe," Billy said. "Please take them. They'll only be wasted otherwise."

Cleve shrugged. "If you're sure," he said, content – fears confirmed – to make a show of relenting. "I'm sure."

Then thanks." He took the phial.

Billy beamed. With that smile, in a sense, the bad times really began.

That night, Cleve answered the boy's performance with one of his own, appearing to take the tranquillisers as he usually did, but failing to swallow them. Once lying on his bunk, face to the wall, he slipped them from his mouth, and under his pillow. Then he pretended sleep.

Prison days both began and finished early; by 8.45 or 9.00 most of the cells in the four wings were in darkness, the inmates locked up until dawn and left to their own devices. Tonight was quieter than most. The weeper in the next cell but one had been transferred to D Wing; there were few other disturbances along the landing. Even without the pill Cleve felt sleep tempting him. From the bunk below he heard practically no sound, except for the occasional sigh. It was impossible to guess if Billy was actually asleep or not. Cleve kept his

silence, occasionally stealing a moment-long glance at the luminous face of his watch. The minutes were leaden, and he feared, as the first hours crept by, that all too soon his imitation of sleep would become the real thing. Indeed he was turning this very possibility around in his mind when unconsciousness overcame him.

He woke much later. His sleep-position seemed not to have altered. The wall was in front of him, the peeled paint like a dim map of some nameless territory. It took him a minute or two to orient himself. There was no sound from the bunk below. Disguising the gesture as one made in sleep, he drew his arm up within eye-range, and looked at the pale-green dial of his watch. It was one-fifty-one. Several hours yet until dawn. He lay in the position he'd woken in for a full quarter of an hour, listening for every sound in the cell, trying to locate Billy. He was loathe to roll over and look for himself, for fear that the boy was standing in the middle of the cell as he had been the night of the visit to the city.

The world, though benighted, was far from silent. He could hear dull footsteps as somebody paced back and forth in the corresponding cell on the landing above; could hear water rushing in the pipes and the sound of a siren on the Caledonian Road. What he couldn't hear was Billy. Not a breath of the boy.

Another quarter of an hour passed, and Cleve could feel the familiar torpor closing in to reclaim him; if he lay still much longer he would fall asleep again, and the next thing he'd know it would be morning. If he was going to learn anything, he had to roll over and look. Wisest, he decided, not to attempt to move surreptitiously, but to turn over as naturally as possible. This he did, muttering to himself, as if in sleep, to add weight to the illusion. Once he had turned completely, and positioned his hand beside his face to shield his spying, he cautiously opened his eyes. The cell seemed darker than it had the night he had seen Billy with his face up to the window. As to the boy, he was not visible. Cleve opened his eyes a little wider and scanned the cell as best he could from between his fingers. There was something amiss, but he couldn't quite work out what it was. He lay there for several minutes, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the murk. They didn't. The scene in front of him remained unclear, like a painting so encrusted with dirt and varnish its depths refuse the investigating eye. Yet he knew – knew – that the shadows in the corners of the cell, and on the opposite wall, were not empty. He wanted to end the anticipation that was making his heart thump, wanted to raise his head from the pebble-filled pillow and call Billy out of hiding. But good sense counseled otherwise. Instead he lay still, and sweated, and

watched.

And now he began to realize what was wrong with the scene before him. The concealing shadows fell where no shadows belonged; they spread across the hall where the feeble light from the window should have been falling. Somehow, between window and wall, that light had been choked and devoured. Cleve closed his eyes to give his befuddled mind a chance to rationalize and reject this conclusion. When he opened them again his heart lurched. The shadow, far from losing potency, had grown a little.

He had never been afraid like this before; never felt a coldness in his innards akin to the chill that found him now. It was all he could do to keep his breath even, and his hands where they lay. His instinct was to wrap himself up and hide his face like a child. Two thoughts kept him from doing so. One was that the slightest movement might draw unwelcome attention to him. The other, that Billy was somewhere in the cell, and perhaps as threatened by this living darkness as he.

And then, from the bunk below, the boy spoke. His voice was soft, so as not to wake his sleeping cell-mate presumably. It was also eerily intimate. Cleve entertained no thought that Billy was talking in his sleep; the time for willful self-deception was long past. The boy was addressing the darkness; of that unpalatable fact there could be no doubt.

"… it hurts…" he said, with a faint note of accusation,"… you didn't tell me how much it hurts…" Was it Cleve's imagination, or did the wraith of shadows bloom a little in response, like a squid's ink in water? He was horribly afraid. The boy was speaking again. His voice was so low Cleve could barely catch the words."… it must be soon…" he said, with quiet urgency,"… I'm not afraid. Not afraid."

Again, the shadow shifted. This time, when Cleve looked into its heart, he made some sense of the chimerical form it embraced. His throat shook; a cry lodged behind his tongue, hot to be shouted.

"… all you can teach me…" Billy was saying,"… quickly…" The words came and went; but Cleve barely heard them. His attention was on the curtain of shadow, and the figure – stitched from darkness – that moved in its folds. It was not an illusion. There was a man there: or rather a crude copy of one, its substance tenuous, its outline deteriorating all the time, and being hauled back into some semblance of humanity again only with the greatest effort. Of the visitor's

features Cleve could see little, but enough to sense deformities paraded like virtues: a face resembling a plate of rotted fruit, pulpy and peeling, swelling here with a nest of flies, and there suddenly fallen away to a pestilent core. How could the boy bring himself to converse so easily with such a thing? And yet, putrescence notwithstanding, there was a bitter dignity in the bearing of the creature, in the anguish of its eyes, and the toothless O of its maw.

Suddenly, Billy stood up. The abrupt movement, after so m any hushed words, almost unleashed the cry from Cleve's throat. He swallowed it, with difficulty, and closed his eyes down to a slit, staring through the bars of his lashes at what happened next.

Billy was talking again, but now the voice was too low to allow for eavesdropping. He stepped towards the shadow, his body blocking much of the figure on the opposite wall. The cell was no more than two or three strides wide, but, by some mellowing of physics, the boy seemed to take five, six, seven steps away from the bunk. Cleve's eyes widened: he knew he was not being watched. The shadow and its acolyte had business between them: it occupied their attention utterly.

Billy's figure was smaller than seemed possible within the confines of the cell, as if he had stepped through the wall and into some other province. And only now, with his eyes wide, did Cleve recognize that place. The darkness from which Billy's visitor was made was cloud-shadow and dust; behind him, barely visible in the bewitched murk, but recognizable to any who had been there, was the city of Cleve's dreams.

Billy had reached his master. The creature towered above him, tattered and spindly, but aching with power. Cleve didn't know how or why the boy had gone to it, and he feared for Billy's safety now that he had, but fear for his own safety shackled him to the bunk. He realized in that moment that he had never loved anyone, man or woman, sufficiently to pursue them into the shadow of that shadow. The thought brought a terrible sense of isolation, knowing that same instant that none, seeing him walk to his damnation, would take a single step to claim him from the brink. Lost souls both; he and the boy.

Now Billy's lord was lifting his swollen head, and the incessant wind in those blue streets was rousing his horse mane into furious life. On the wind, the same voices Cleve had heard carried before, the cries of mad children, somewhere between tears and howls. As if encouraged by these voices, the entity reached out towards Billy and embraced

him, wrapping the boy round in vapour. Billy did not struggle in this embrace, but rather returned it. Cleve, unable to watch this horrid intimacy, closed his eyes against it, and when -seconds? minutes? later – he opened them again, the encounter seemed to be over. The shadow-thing was blowing apart, relinquishing its slender claim to coherence. It fragmented, pieces of its tattered anatomy flying off into the streets like litter before wind. Its departure seemed to signal the dispersal of the entire scene; the streets and houses were already being devoured by dust and distance. Even before the last of the shadow's scraps had been wafted out of sight the city was lost to sight. Cleve was pleased to be shut of it. Reality, grim as it was, was preferable to that desolation. Brick by painted brick the wall was asserting itself again, and Billy, delivered from his master's arms, was back in the solid geometry of the cell, staring up at the light through the window.

Cleve did not sleep again that night. Indeed he wondered, lying on his unyielding mattress and staring up at the stalactites of paint depending from the ceiling, whether he could ever find safety in sleep again.

Sunlight was a showman. It threw its brightness down with such flamboyance, eager as any tinsel-merchant to dazzle and distract. But beneath the gleaming surface it illuminated was another state; one that sunlight – ever the crowd-pleaser – conspired to conceal. It was vile and desperate, that condition. Most, blinded by sight, never even glimpsed it. But Cleve knew the state of sunlessness now; had even walked it, in dreams; and though he mourned the loss of his innocence, he knew he could never retrace his steps back into light's hall of mirrors.

He tried his damnedest to keep this change in him from Billy; the last thing he wanted was for the boy to suspect his eavesdropping. But concealment was well-nigh impossible. Though the following day Cleve made every show of normality he could contrive, he could not quite cover his unease. It slipped out without his being able to control it, like sweat from his pores. And the boy knew, no doubt of it, he knew. Nor was he slow to give voice to his suspicions. When, following the afternoon's Workshop, they returned to their cell, Billy was quick to come to the point.

"What's wrong with you today?"

Cleve busied himself with re-making his bed, afraid even to glance at Billy. "Nothing's wrong," he said. "I don't feel particularly well, that's all."

"You have a bad night?" the boy enquired. Cleve could feel Billy's eyes boring into his back.

"No," he said, pacing his denial so that it didn't come too quickly. "I took your pills, like always." "Good."

The exchange faltered, and Cleve was allowed to finish his bed making in silence. The business could only be extended so long, however. When he turned from the bunk, job done, he found Billy sitting at the small table, with one of Cleve's books open in his lap. He casually flicked through the volume, all sign of his previous suspicion vanished. Cleve knew better than to trust to mere appearances however.

"Why'd you read these things?" the boy asked.

"Passes the time," Cleve replied, undoing all his labours by clambering up on to the top bunk and stretching out there.

"No. I don't mean why do you read books? I mean, why read these books? All this stuff about sin." Cleve only half-heard the question. Lying there on the bunk reminded him all too acutely of how the night had been. Reminded him too that darkness was even now crawling up the side of the world again. At that thought his stomach seemed to aspire to his throat.

"Did you hear me?" the boy asked.

Cleve murmured that he had.

"Well, why then; why the books? About damnation and all?"

"Nobody else takes them out of the library," Cleve replied, having difficulty shaping thoughts to speak when the others, unspoken, were so much more demanding.

"You don't believe it then?"

"No," he replied. "No; I don't believe a word of it."

The boy kept his silence a while. Though Cleve wasn't looking at him, he could hear Billy turning page. Then, another question, but spoken more quietly; a confession.

"Do you ever get afraid?

The enquiry startled Cleve from his trance. The conversation had

changed back from talk of reading-matter to something altogether more pertinent. Why did Billy ask about fear, unless he too was afraid?

"What have I got to be scared of?" Cleve asked.

From the corner of his eye he caught the boy shrugging slightly before replying. "Things that happen," he said, his voice soulless. "Things you can't control."

"Yes," Cleve replied, not certain of where this exchange was leading. "Yes, of course. Sometimes I'm scared." "What do you do then?" Billy asked.

"Nothing to do, is there?" Cleve said. His voice was as hushed as Billy's. "I gave up praying the morning my father died."

He heard the soft pat as Billy closed the book, and inclined his head sufficiently to catch sight of the boy. Billy could not entirely conceal his agitation. He is afraid, Cleve saw; he doesn't want the night to come any more than I do. He found the thought of their shared fear reassuring. Perhaps the boy didn't entirely belong to the shadow; perhaps he could even cajole Billy into pointing their route out of this spiraling nightmare.

He sat upright, his head within inches of the cell ceiling. Billy looked up from his meditations, his face a pallid oval of twitching muscle. Now was the time to speak, Cleve knew; now, before the lights were switched out along the landings, and all the cells consigned to shadows. There would be no time then for explanations. The boy would already be half lost to the city, and beyond persuasion.

"I have dreams," Cleve said. Billy said nothing, but simply stared back, hollow-eyed." -I dream a city." The boy didn't flinch. He clearly wasn't going to volunteer elucidation; he would have to be bullied into it. "Do you know what I'm talking about?"

Billy shook his head. "No," he said, lightly, "I never dream."

"Everybody dreams."

"Then I just don't remember them."

"I remember mine," Cleve said. He was determined, now that he'd broached the subject, not to let Billy squirm free. "And you're there. You're in that city."

Now the boy flinched; only a treacherous lash, but enough to reassure Cleve that he wasn't wasting his breath. "What is that place, Billy?" he asked.

"How should I know?" the boy returned, about to laugh, then discarding the attempt. "I don't know, do I? They're your dreams."

Before Cleve could reply he heard the voice of one of the officers as he moved along the row of cells, advising the men to bed down for the night. Very soon, the lights would be extinguished and he would be locked up in this narrow cell for ten hours. With Billy; and phantoms "Last night -" he said, fearful of mentioning what he'd heard and seen without due preparation, but more fearful still of facing another night on the borders of the city, alone in darkness. "Last night I saw -" He faltered. Why wouldn't the words come? "Saw -"

"Saw what?" the boy demanded, his face intractable; whatever murmur of apprehension there had been in it had now vanished. Perhaps he too had heard the officer's advance, and known that there was nothing to be done; no way of staying the night's advance. "What did you see? Billy insisted. Cleve sighed. "My mother," he replied. The boy betrayed his relief only in the tenuous smile that crept across his lips.

"Yes… I saw my mother. Large as life."

"And it upset you, did it?" Billy asked.

"Sometimes dreams do."

The officer had reached B. 3. 20. "Lights out in two minutes," he said as he passed.

"You should take some more of those pills," Billy advised, putting down the book and crossing to his bunk. "Then you'd be like me. No dreams."

Cleve had lost. He, the arch-bluffer, had been out-bluffed by the boy, and now had to take the consequences. He lay, facing the ceiling, counting off the seconds until the light went out, while below the boy undressed and slipped between the sheets.

There was still time to jump up and call the officer back; time to beat his head against the door until somebody came. But what would he say, to justify his histrionics? That he had bad dreams?; who didn't? That he was afraid of the dark?; who wasn't? They would

laugh in his face and tell him to go back to bed, leaving him with all camouflage blown, and the boy and his master waiting at the wall. There was no safety in such tactics.

Nor in prayer either. He had told Billy the truth, about his giving up God when his prayers for his father's life had gone unanswered. Of such divine neglect was atheism made; belief could not be rekindled now, however profound his terror.

Thoughts of his father led inevitably to thoughts of childhood; few other subjects, if any, could have engrossed his mind sufficiently to steal him from his fears but this. When the lights were finally extinguished, his frightened mind took refuge in memories. His heart-rate slowed; his fingers ceased to tremble, and eventually, without his being the least aware of it, sleep stole him.

The distractions available to his conscious mind were not available to his unconscious. Once asleep, fond recollection was banished; childhood memories became a thing of the past, and he was back, bloody-footed, in that terrible city.

Or rather, on its borders. For tonight he did not follow the familiar route past the Georgian house and its attendant tenements, but walked instead to the outskirts of the city, where the wind was stronger than ever, and the voices it carried clear. Though he expected with every step he took to see Billy and his dark companion, he saw nobody. Only butterflies accompanied him along the path, luminous as his watch-face. They settled on his shoulders and his hair like confetti, then fluttered off again.

He reached the edge of the city without incident and stood, scanning the desert. The clouds, solid as ever, moved overhead with the majesty of juggernauts. The voices seemed closer tonight, he thought, and the passions they expressed less distressing than he had found them previously. Whether the mellowing was in them or in his response to them he couldn't be certain.

And then, as he watched the dunes and the sky, mesmerized by their blankness, he heard a sound and glanced over his shoulder to see a smiling man, dressed in what was surely his Sunday finery, walking out of the city towards him. He was carrying a knife; the blood on it, and on his hand and shirt-front, was wet. Even in his dream-state, and immune, Cleve was intimidated by the sight and stepped back – a word of self-defence on his lips. The smiling man seemed not to see him however, but advanced past Cleve and out into the desert,

dropping the blade as he crossed some invisible boundary. Only now did Cleve see that others had done the same, and that the ground at the city limit was littered with lethal keepsakes – knives, ropes (even a human hand, lopped off at the wrist) – most of which were all but buried.

The wind was bringing the voices again: tatters of senseless songs and half-finished laughter. He looked up from the sand. The exiled man had gone out a hundred yards from the city and was now standing on the top of one of the dunes, apparently waiting. The voices were becoming louder all the time. Cleve was suddenly nervous. Whenever he had been here in the city, and heard this cacophony, the picture he had conjured of its originators had made his blood run cold. Could he now stand and wait for the banshees to appear? Curiosity was discretion's better. He glued his eyes to the ridge over which they would come, his heart thumping, unable to look away. The man in the Sunday suit had begun to take his jacket off. He discarded it, and began to loosen his tie.

And now Cleve thought he saw something in the dunes, and the noise rose to an ecstatic howl of welcome. He stared, defying his nerves to betray him, determined to look this horror in its many faces. Suddenly, above the din of their music, somebody was screaming; a man's voice, but high-pitched, gelded with terror. It did not come from here in the dream-city, but from that other fiction he occupied, the name of which he couldn't quite remember. He pressed his attention back to the dunes, determined not to be denied the sight of the reunion about to take place in front of him. The scream in that nameless elsewhere mounted to a throat-breaking height, and stopped. But now an alarm bell was ringing in its place, more insistent than ever. Cleve could feel his dream slipping.

"No…" he murmured,"… let me see…"

The dunes were moving. But so was his consciousness – out of the city and back towards his cell. His protests brought him no concession. The desert faded, the city too. He opened his eyes. The lights in the cell were still off: the alarm bell was ringing. There were shouts in cells on the landings above and below, and the sound of officers' voices, raised in a confusion of enquiries and demands.

He lay on his bunk a moment, hoping, even now, to be returned into the enclave of his dream. But no; the alarm was too shrill, the mounting hysteria in the cells around too compelling. He conceded defeat and sat up, wide awake. "What's going on?" he said to Billy.

The boy was not standing in his place by the wall. Asleep, for once, despite the din.

"Billy?

Cleve leaned over the edge of his bunk, and peered into the space below. It was empty. The sheets and blankets had been thrown back.

Cleve jumped down from his bunk. The entire contents of the cell could be taken at two glances, there was nowhere to hide. The boy was not to be seen. Had he been spirited away while Cleve slept? It was not unheard of; this was the ghost train of which Devlin had warned: the unexplained removal of difficult prisoners to other establishments. Cleve had never heard of this happening at night, but there was a first time for everything.

He crossed to the door to see if he could make some sense of the shouting outside, but it defied interpretation. The likeliest explanation was a fight, he suspected: two cons who could no longer bear the idea of another hour in the same space. He tried to work out where the initial scream had come from, to his right or left, above or below; but the dream had confounded all direction.

As he stood at the door, hoping an officer might pass by, he felt a change in the air. It was so subtle he scarcely registered it at first. Only when he raised his hand to wipe sleep from his eyes did he realize that his arms were solid gooseflesh.

From behind him he now heard the sound of breathing, or a ragged parody of same.

He mouthed the word "Billy' but didn't speak it. The gooseflesh had found his spine; now he began to shake. The cell wasn't empty after all; there was somebody in the tiny space with him.

He screwed his courage tight, and forced himself to turn around. The cell was darker than it had been when he woke; the air was a teasing veil. But Billy was not in the cell; nobody was.

And then the noise came again, and drew Cleve's attention to the bottom bunk. The space was pitch-black, a shadow – like that on the wall – too profound and too volatile to have natural origins. Out of it, a croaking attempt at breath that might have been the last moments of an asthmatic. He realized that the murk in the cell had its source there – in the narrow space of Billy's bed; the shadow bled onto the floor and curled up like fog on to the top of the bunk. Cleve's supply of fear

was not inexhaustible. In the past several days he had used it up in dreams and waking dreams; he'd sweated, he'd frozen, he'd lived on the edge of sane experience and survived. Now, though his body still insisted on gooseflesh, his mind was not moved to panic. He felt cooler than he ever had; whipped by recent events into a new impartiality. He would not cower. He would not cover his eyes and pray for morning, because if he did one day he would wake to find himself dead and he'd never know the nature of this mystery. He took a deep breath, and approached the bunk. It had begun to shake. The shrouded occupant in the lower tier was moving about violently.

"Billy," Cleve said.

The shadow moved. It pooled around his feet; it rolled up into his face, smelling of rain on stone, cold and comfortless.

He was standing no more than a yard from the bunk, and still he could make nothing out; the shadow defied him. Not to be denied sight, he reached towards the bed. At his solicitation the veil divided like smoke, and the shape that thrashed on the mattress made itself apparent.

It was Billy, of course; and yet not. A lost Billy, perhaps, or one to come. If so, Cleve wanted no part of a future that could breed such trauma. There, on the lower bunk, lay a dark, wretched shape, still solidifying as Cleve watched, knitting itself together from the shadows. There was something of a rabid fox in its incandescent eyes, in its arsenal of needle-teeth; something of an upturned insect in the way it was half curled upon itself, its back more shell than flesh and more nightmare than either. No part of it was fixed. Whatever figuration it had (perhaps it had many) Cleve was watching that status dissolve. The teeth were growing yet longer, and in so doing more insubstantial, their matter extruded to the point of frailty, then dispersed like mist; its hooked limbs, pedaling the air, were also growing paltry. Beneath the chaos he saw the ghost of Billy Tait, mouth open and babbling agonies, striving to make itself known. He wanted to reach into the maelstrom and snatch the boy out, but he sensed that the process he was watching had its own momentum and it might be fatal to intervene. All he could do was stand and watch as Billy's thin white limbs and heaving abdomen writhed to slough off this dire anatomy. The luminous eyes were almost the last to go, spilling out from their sockets on myriad threads and flying off into black vapour.

At last, he saw Billy's face, truant clues to its former condition still

flickering across it. And then, even these were dispersed, the shadows gone, and only Billy was lying on the bunk, naked and heaving with the exertion of his anguish. He looked at Cleve, his face innocent of expression. Cleve remembered how the boy had complained to the creature from the city."… it hurts…" he'd said, hadn't he?,"… you didn't tell me how much it hurts…". It was the observable truth. The boy's body was a wasteland of sweat and bone; a more unappetising sight was scarcely imaginable. But human; at least that.

Billy opened his mouth. His lips were ruddy and slick, as if he were wearing lipstick.

"Now…" he said, trying to speak between painful breaths."… now what shall we do?"

The act of speaking seemed too much for him. He made a gagging sound in the back of his throat, and pressed his hand to his mouth. Cleve moved aside as Billy stood up and stumbled across to the bucket in the corner of the cell, kept there for their night-wastes. He failed to reach it before nausea overtook him; fluid splashed between his fingers and hit the floor. Cleve looked away as Billy threw up, preparing himself for the stench he would have to tolerate until slopping-out time the following morning. It was not the smell of vomit that filled the cell, however, but something sweeter and more cloying.

Mystified, Cleve looked back towards the figure crouching in the corner. On the floor between his feet were splashes of dark fluid; rivulets of the same ran down his bare legs. Even in the gloom of the cell, it was unmistakably blood.

In the most well-ordered of prisons violence could – and inevitably did – erupt without warning. The relationship of two cons, incarcerated together for sixteen hours out of every twenty-four, was an unpredictable thing. But as far as had been apparent to either prisoners or officers there had been no bad blood between Lowell and Nayler; nor, until that scream began, had there been a sound from their cell: no argument, no raised voices. What had induced Nayler to spontaneously attack and slaughter his cell-mate, and then inflict devastating wounds upon himself, was a subject for debate in dining-hall and exercise yard alike. The why of the problem, however, took second place to the how. The rumours describing the condition of Lowell's body when found defied the imagination; even amongst men inured against casual brutality the descriptions were met with shock. Lowell had not been much liked; he had been a bully and a cheat. But nothing he'd done deserved such mutilation. The man had been ripped

open: his eyes put out, his genitals torn off. Nayler, the only possible antagonist, had then contrived to open up his own belly. He was now in an Intensive Care Unit; the prognosis was not hopeful.

It was easy, with such a buzz of outrage going about the Wing, for Cleve to spend the day all but unnoticed. He too had a story to tell: but who would believe it? He barely believed it himself. In fact on and off through the day – when the images came back to him afresh -he asked himself if he were entirely sane. But then sanity was a movable feast wasn't it?; one man's madness might be another's politics. All he knew for certain was that he had seen Billy Tait transform. He clung to that certainty with a tenaciousness born of near-despair. If he ceased to believe the evidence of his own eyes, he had no defence left to hold the darkness at bay.

After ablutions and breakfast, the entire Wing was confined to cells; workshops, recreation – any activity which required movement around the landings – was cancelled while Lowell's cell was photographed and examined, then swabbed out. Following breakfast, Billy slept through the morning; a state more akin to coma than sleep, such was its profundity. When he awoke for lunch he was brighter and more out-going than Cleve had seen him in weeks. There was no sign beneath the vacuous chatter that he knew what had happened the previous night. In the afternoon Cleve faced him with the truth.

"You killed Lowell," he said. There was no point in trying to pretend ignorance any longer; if the boy didn't remember now what he'd done, he would surely recall in time. And with that memory, how long before he remembered that Cleve had watched him transform? Better to confess it now. "I saw you," Cleve said, "I saw you change…"

Billy didn't seem much disturbed by these revelations.

"Yes," he said. "I killed Lowell. Do you blame me?" The question, begging a hundred others, was put lightly, as a matter of mild interest, no more.

"What happened to you?" Cleve said. "I saw you – there -" he pointed, appalled at the memory, at the lower bunk, "you weren't human."

"I didn't mean you to see," the boy replied. "I gave you the pills, didn't I? You shouldn't have spied." "And the night before…" Cleve said, "I was awake then too."

The boy blinked like a bemused bird, head slightly cocked. "You

really have been stupid," he said. "So stupid." "Whether I like it or not, I'm not out of this," Cleve said, "I have dreams."

"Oh, yes." Now a frown marred the porcelain brow. "Yes. You dream the city, don't you?"

"What is that place, Billy?"

"I read somewhere: the dead have highways. You ever hear that? Well… they have cities too." "The dead? You mean it's some kind of ghost town?"

"I never wanted you to become involved. You've been better to me than most here. But I told you, I came to Pentonville to do business."

"With Tait."

That's right."

Cleve wanted to laugh; what he was being told – a city of the dead? – only heaped nonsense upon nonsense. And yet his exasperated reason had not sniffed out one explanation more plausible.

"My grandfather killed his children," Billy said, “because he didn't want to pass his condition on to another generation. He learned late, you see. He didn't realize, until he had a wife and children, that he wasn't like most men. He was special. But he didn't want the skills he'd been given; and he didn't want his children to survive with that same power in their blood. He would have killed himself, and finished the job, but that my mother escaped. Before he could find her and kill her too, he was arrested."

"And hanged. And buried."

"Hanged and buried; but not lost. Nobody's lost, Cleve. Not ever."

"You came here to find him."

"More than find him: make him help me. I knew from the age of ten what I was capable of. Not quite consciously; but I had an inkling. And I was afraid. Of course I was afraid: it was a terrible mystery."

"This mutation: you've always done it?"

"No. Only known I was capable of it. I came here to make my grandfather tutor me, make him show me how. Even now…" he looked down at his wasted arms,"… with him teaching me… the pain

is almost unbearable." "Why do it then?"

The boy looked at Cleve incredulously. "To be not myself; to be smoke and shadow. To be something terrible." He seemed genuinely puzzled by Cleve's unwillingness. "Wouldn't you do the same?"

Cleve shook his head.

“ What you became last night was repellent.”

Billy nodded. “ That's what my grandfather thought. At his trial he called himself an abomination. Not that they knew what he was talking about of course, but that's what he said. He stood up and said: "I am Satan's excrement -”." Billy smiled at the thought." “- for God's sake hang me and burn me." He's changed his mind since then. The century's getting old and stale; it needs new tribes." He looked at Cleve intently. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I won't hurt you, unless you try to tell tales. You won't do that, will you?"

"What could I say that would sound like sanity?" Cleve returned mildly. "No; I won't tell tales." "Good. And in a little while I'll be gone; and you'll be gone. And you can forget."

"I doubt it."

"Even the dreams will stop, when I'm not here. You only share them because you have some mild talents as a sensitive. Trust me. There's nothing to be afraid of."

The city -”

"What about it?"

"Where are its citizens? I never see anybody. No; that's not quite true. I saw one. A man with a knife… going out into the desert…"

"I can't help you. I go as a visitor myself. All I know is what my grandfather tells me: that it's a city occupied by dead souls. Whatever you've seen there, forget about it. You don't belong there. You're not dead yet."

Was it wise to believe always what the dead told you?; were they purged of all deceit by the act of dying, and delivered into their new state like saints? Cleve could not believe such naivetй. More likely they took their talents with them, good and bad, and used them as best they could. There would be shoemakers in paradise, wouldn't

there?; foolish to think they'd forgotten how to sew leather.

So perhaps Edgar Tait lied about the city. There was more to that place than Billy knew. What about the voices on the wind?, the man with the knife, dropping it amongst a litter of weapons before moving off to God alone knew where? What ritual was that?

Now – with the fear used up, and no untainted reality left to cling to, Cleve saw no reason not to go to the city willingly. What could be there, in those dusty streets, that was worse than what he had seen in the bunk below him, or what had happened to Lowell and Nayler? Beside such atrocities the city was a haven. There was a serenity in its empty thoroughfares and plazas; a sense Cleve had there that all action was over, all rage and distress finished with; that these interiors (with the bath running and the cup brimming) had seen the worst, and were now content to sit out the millennium. When that night brought sleep, and the city opened up in front of him, he went into it not as a frightened man astray in hostile territory, but as a visitor content to relax a while in a place he knew too well to become lost in, but not well enough to be weary of.

As if in response to this new-found ease, the city opened itself to him. Wandering the streets, feet bloody as ever, he found the doors open wide, the curtains at the windows drawn back. He did not disparage the invitation they offered, but went to look more closely at the houses and tenements. On closer inspection he found them not the paradigms of domestic calm he'd first taken them for. In each he discovered some sign of violence recently done. In one, perhaps no more than an overturned chair, or a mark on the floor where a heel had slid in a spot of blood; in others, the manifestations were more obvious. A hammer, its claw clotted, had been left on a table laid with newspapers. There was a room with its floorboards ripped up, and black plastic parcels, suspiciously slick, laid beside the hole. In one, a mirror had been shattered; in another, a set of false teeth left beside a hearth in which a fire flared and spat. They were murder scenes, all of them. The victims had gone – to other cities, perhaps, full of slaughtered children and murdered friends – leaving these tableaux fixed forever in the breathless moments that followed the crime. Cleve walked down the streets, the perfect voyeur, and peered into scene after scene, reconstructing in his mind's eye the hours that had preceded the studied stillness of each room. Here a child had died: its cot was overturned; here someone had been murdered in their bed, the pillow soaked in blood, the axe on the carpet. Was this damnation then?; the killers obliged to wait out some portion of eternity (all of it, perhaps) in the room they'd murdered in? Of the malefactors

themselves he saw nothing, though logic implied that they must be close by. Was it that they had the power of invisibility to keep themselves from the prying eyes of touring dreamers like himself?; or did a time in this nowhere transform them, so that they were no longer flesh and blood, but became part of their cell: a chair, a china doll?

Then he remembered the man at the perimeter, who'd come in his fine suit, bloody-handed, and walked out into the desert. He had not been invisible.

"Where are you?" he said, standing on the threshold of a mean room, with an open oven, and utensils in the sink, water running on them. "Show yourself."

A movement caught his eye and he glanced across to the door. There was a man standing there. He had been there all along, Cleve realized, but so still, and so perfectly a part of this room, that he had not been visible until he moved his eyes and looked Cleve's way. He felt a twinge of unease, thinking that each room he had peered into had, most likely, contained one or more killers, each similarly camouflaged by statis. The man, knowing he'd been seen, stepped out of hiding. He was in late middle-age, and had cut himself that morning as he shaved. "W ho are you?" he said. "I've seen you before. Walking by."

He spoke softly and sadly; an unlikely killer, Cleve thought.

"Just a visitor," he told the man.

"There are no visitors, here," he replied, “only prospective citizens."

Cleve frowned, trying to work out what the man meant. But his dream-mind was sluggish, and before he could solve the riddle of the man's words there were others.

"Do I know you?" the man asked. "I find I forget more and more. That's no use, is it? If I forget I'll never leave, will I?"

"Leave?" Cleve repeated.

"Make an exchange," the man said, re-aligning his toupe.

"And go where?"

"Back. Do it over."

Now he approached Cleve across the room. He stretched out his hands, palms up; they were blistered. "You can help me," he said, "I can make a deal with the best of them."

"I don't understand you."

The man clearly though the was bluffing. His upper lip, which boasted a dyed black moustache, curled. "Yes you do," he said. "You understand perfectly. You just want to sell yourself, the way everybody does. Highest bidder, is it? What are you, an assassin?"

Cleve shook his head. "I'm just dreaming," he replied.

The man's fit of pique subsided. "Be a friend," he said. "I've got no influence; not like some. Some of them, you know, they come here and they're out again in a matter of hours. They're professionals. They make arrangements. But me? With me it was a crime of passion. I didn't come prepared. I'll stay here 'til I can make a deal. Please be a friend."

"I can't help you," Cleve said, not even certain of what the man was requesting.

The killer nodded. "Of course not," he said, "I didn't expect…"

He turned from Cleve and moved to the oven. Heat flared up from it and made a mirage of the hob. Casually, he put one of his blistered palms on the door and closed it; almost as soon as he had done so it creaked open again. "Do you know just how appetising it is; the smell of cooking flesh?" he said, as he returned to the oven door and attempted to close it a second time. "Can anybody blame me? Really?"

Cleve left him to his ramblings; if there was sense there it was probably not worth his labouring over. The talk of exchanges and of escape from the city: it defied Cleve's comprehension.

He wandered on, tired now of peering into the houses. He'd seen all he wanted to see. Surely morning was close, and the bell would ring on the landing. Perhaps he should even wake himself, he thought, and be done with this tour for the night.

As the thought occurred, he saw the girl. She was no more than six or seven years old, and she was standing at the next intersection. This was no killer, surely. He started towards her. She, either out of shyness or some less benign motive, turned to her right and ran off. Cleve followed. By the time he had reached the intersection she was

already a long way down the next street; again he gave chase. As dreams would have such pursuits, the laws of physics did not pertain equally to pursuer and pursued. The girl seemed to move easily, while Cleve struggled against air as thick as treacle. He did not give up, however, but pressed on wherever the girl led. He was soon a good distance from any location he recognized in a warren of yards and alleyways – all, he supposed, scenes of blood-letting. Unlike the main thoroughfares, this ghetto contained few entire spaces, only snatches of geography: a grass verge, more red than green; a piece of scaffolding, with a noose depending from it; a pile of earth. And now, simply, a wall. The girl had led him into a cul-de-sac; she herself had disappeared however, leaving him facing a plain brick wall, much weathered, with a narrow window in it. He approached: this was clearly what he'd been led here to see. He peered through the reinforced glass, dirtied on his side by an accumulation of bird-droppings, and found himself staring into one of the cells at Pentonville. His stomach flipped over. What kind of game was this; led out of a cell and into this dream-city, only to be led back into prison? But a few seconds of study told him that it was not his cell. It was Lowell and Nayler's. Theirs were the pictures sellotaped to the grey brick, theirs the blood spread over floor and wall and bunk and door. This was another murder-scene.

"My God Almighty," he murmured. "Billy…"

He turned away from the wall. In the sand at his feet lizards were mating; the wind that found its way into this backwater brought butterflies. As he watched them dance, the bell rang in B Wing, and it was morning.

It was a trap. Its mechanism was by no means clear to Cleve – but he had no doubt of its purpose. Billy would go to the city; soon. The cell in which he had committed murder already awaited him, and of all the wretched places Cleve had seen in that assemblage of charnel-houses surely the tiny, blood-drenched cell was the worst. The boy could not know what was planned for him; his grandfather had lied about the city by exclusion, failing to tell Billy what special qualifications were required to exist there. And why? Cleve returned to the oblique conversation he'd had with the man in the kitchen. That talk of exchanges, of deal-making, of going back. Edgar Tait had regretted his sins, hadn't he?; he'd decided, as the years passed, that he was not the Devil's excrement, that to be returned into the world would not be so bad an idea. Billy was somehow an instrument in that return. "My grandfather doesn't like you," the boy said, when they were locked up again after lunch. For the second consecutive day all

recreation and workshop activities had been cancelled, while a cell-by-cell enquiry was undertaken regarding Lowell, and – as of the early hours of that day – Nayler's deaths.

"Does he not?" Cleve said. "And why?"

"Says you're too inquisitive. In the city."

Cleve was sitting on the top bunk; Billy on the chair against the opposite wall. The boy's eyes were bloodshot; a small, but constant, tremor had taken over his body.

"You're going to die," Cleve said. What other way to state that fact was there, but baldly? "I saw… in the city…" Billy shook his head. "Sometimes you talk like a crazy man. My grandfather says I shouldn't trust you." "He's afraid of me, that's why."

Billy laughed derisively. It was an ugly sound, learned, Cleve guessed, from Grandfather Tait. "He's afraid of no one," Billy retorted.

" – afraid of what I'll see. Of what I'll tell you."

"No," said the boy, with absolute conviction.

"He told you to kill Lowell, didn't he?"

Billy's head jerked up. "Why'd you say that?"

"You never wanted to murder him. Maybe scare them both a bit; but not kill them. It was your loving grandfather's idea."

"Nobody tells me what to do," Billy replied; his gaze was icy. "Nobody."

"All right," Cleve conceded, “maybe he persuaded you, eh?; told you it was a matter of family pride. Something like that?" The observation clearly touched a nerve; the tremors had increased.

"So? What if he did?"

"I've seen where you're going to go, Billy. A place just waiting for you…" The boy stared at Cleve, but didn't make to interrupt. "Only murderers occupy the city, Billy. That's why your grandfather's there. And if he can find a replacement – if he can reach out and make more murder – he can go free."

Billy stood up, face like a fury. All trace of derision had gone. "What

do you mean: free?"

"Back to the world. Back here."

"You're lying -”

"Ask him."

"He wouldn't cheat me. His blood's my blood."

"You think he cares? After fifty years in that place, waiting for a chance to be out and away. You think he gives a damn how he does it?"

"I'll tell him how you lie…" Billy said. The anger was not entirely directed at Cleve; there was an undercurrent of doubt there, which Billy was trying to suppress. "You're dead," he said, “when he finds out how you're trying to poison me against him. You'll see him, then. Oh yes. You'll see him. And you'll wish to Christ you hadn't."

There seemed to be no way out. Even if Cleve could convince the authorities to move him before night fell – (a slim chance indeed; he would have to reverse all that he had claimed about the boy – tell them Billy was dangerously insane, or something similar. Certainly not the truth.) – even if he were to have himself transferred to another cell, there was no promise of safety in such a maneuver. The boy had said he was smoke and shadow. Neither door nor bars could keep such insinuations at bay; the fate of Lowell and Nayler was proof positive of that. Nor was Billy alone. There was Edgar St Clair Tait to be accounted for; and what powers might he possess? Yet to stay in the same cell with the boy tonight would amount to self-slaughter, wouldn't it? He would be delivering himself into the hands of the beasts.

When they left their cells for the evening meal, Cleve looked around for Devlin, located him, and asked for the opportunity of a short interview, which was granted. After the meal, Cleve reported to the officer. "You asked me to keep an eye on Billy Tait, sir."

"What about him?"

Cleve had thought hard about what he might tell Devlin that would bring an immediate transfer: nothing had come to mind. He stumbled, hoping for inspiration, but was empty-mouthed.

"I… I… want to put in a request for a cell transfer."

"Why?"

The boy's unbalanced," Cleve replied. "I'm afraid he's going to do me harm. Have another of his fits -" "You could lay him flat with one hand tied behind your back; he's worn to the bone." At this point, had he been talking to Mayflower, Cleve might have been able to make a direct appeal to the man. With Devlin such tactics would be doomed from the beginning.

"I don't know why you're complaining. He's been as good as gold," said Devlin, savouring the parody of fond father. "Quiet; always polite. He's no danger to you or anyone."

"You don't know him -"

"What are you trying to pull here?"

Put me in a Rule 43 cell, sir. Anywhere, I don't mind. Just get me out of his way. Please."

Devlin didn't reply, but stared at Cleve, mystified. At last, he said, "You are scared of him."

"Yes."

"What's wrong with you? You've shared cells with hard men and never turned a hair."

"He's different," Cleve replied; there was little else he could say, except: "He's insane. I tell you he's insane." "All the world's crazy, save thee and me, Smith. Hadn't you heard?" Devlin laughed. "Go back to your cell and stop belly-aching. You don't want a ghost train ride, now do you?"

When Cleve returned to the cell, Billy was writing a letter. Sitting on his bunk, poring over the paper, he looked utterly vulnerable. What Devlin had said was true: the boy was worn to the bone. It was difficult to believe, looking at the ladder of his vertebrae, visible through his T-shirt, that this frail form could survive the throes of transformation. But then, maybe it would not. Maybe the rigours of change would tear him apart with time. But not soon enough.

"Billy…"

The boy didn't take his eyes from his letter.

"… what I said, about the city…"

He stopped writing '… maybe I was imagining it all. Just dreaming…"

–and started again.

"… I only told you because I was afraid for you. That was all. I want us to be friends…"

Billy looked up.

"It's not in my hands," he said, very simply. "Not now. It's up to Grandfather. He may be merciful; he may not." "Why do you have to tell him?"

"He knows what's in me. He and I… we're like one. That's how I know he wouldn't cheat me." Soon it would be night; the lights would go out along the wing, the shadows would come.

"So I just have to wait, do I?" Cleve said.

Billy nodded. "I'll call him, and then we'll see."

Call him?, Cleve thought. Did the old man need summoning from his resting place every night? Was that what he had seen Billy doing, standing in the middle of the cell, eyes closed and face up to the window? If so, perhaps the boy could be prevented from putting in his call to the dead.

As the evening deepened Cleve lay on his bunk and thought his options through. Was it better to wait here, and see what judgement came from Tait, or attempt to take control of the situation and block the old man's arrival? If he did so, there would be no going back; no room for pleas or apologies: his aggression would undoubtedly breed aggression. If he failed to prevent the boy from calling Tait, it would be the end.

The lights went out. In cells up and down the five landings of B Wing men would be turning their faces to their pillows. Some, perhaps, would lie awake planning their careers when this minor hiccup in their professional lives was over; others would be in the arms of invisible mistresses. Cleve listened to the sounds of the cell: the rattling progress of water in the pipes, the shallow breathing from the bunk below. Sometimes it seemed that he had lived a second lifetime on this stale pillow, marooned in darkness.

The breathing from below soon became practically inaudible; nor was there sound of movement. Perhaps Billy was waiting for Cleve to fall asleep before he made any move. If so, the boy would wait in vain. He would not close his eyes and leave them to slaughter him in his sleep. He wasn't a pig, to be taken uncomplaining to the knife. Moving as cautiously as possible, so as to arouse no suspicion, Cleve unbuckled his belt and pulled it through the loops of his trousers. He might make a more adequate binding by tearing up his sheet and pillowcase, but he could not do so without arousing Billy's attention. Now he waited, belt in hand, and pretended sleep. Tonight he was grateful that the noise in the Wing kept stirring him from dozing, because it was fully two hours before Billy moved out of his bunk, two hours in which – despite his fear of what would happen should he sleep Cleve's eyelids betrayed him on three or four occasions. But others on the landings were tearful tonight; the deaths of Lovell and Nayler had made even the toughest cons jittery. Shouts – and counter calls from those woken – punctuated the hours. Despite the fatigue in his limbs, sleep did not master him.

When Billy finally go up from the lower bunk it was well past twelve, and the landing was all but quiet. Cleve could hear the boy's breath; it was no longer even, but had a catch in it. He watched, eyes like slits, as Billy crossed the cell to his familiar place in front of the window. There was no doubt that he was about to call up the old man. As Billy closed his eyes, Cleve sat up, threw off his blanket and slipped down from the bunk. The boy was slow to respond. Before he quite comprehended what was happening, Cleve had crossed the cell, and thrust him back against the wall, hand clamped over Billy's mouth.

"No, you don't," he hissed, "I'm not going to go like Lowell." Billy struggled, but Cleve was easily his physical superior.

"He's not going to come tonight," Cleve said, staring into the boy's wide eyes, “because you're not going to call him."

Billy fought more violently to be free, biting hard against his captor's palm. Cleve instinctively removed his hand and in two strides the boy was at the window, reaching up. In his throat, a strange half-song; on his face, sudden and inexplicable tears. Cleve dragged him away.

"Shut your noise up!" he snapped. But the boy continued to make the sound. Cleve hit him, open-handed but hard, across the face. "Shut up!" he said. Still the boy refused to cease his singing; now the music

had taken on another rhythm. Again, Cleve hit him; and again. But the assault failed to silence him. There was a whisper of change in the air of the cell; a shifting in its chiaroscuro. The shadows were moving.

Panic took Cleve. Without warning he made a fist and punched the boy hard in the stomach. As Billy doubled up an upper-cut caught his jaw. It drove his head back against the wall, his skull connecting with the brick. Billy's legs gave, and he collapsed. A featherweight, Cleve had once thought, and it was true. Two good punches and the boy was laid out cold.

Cleve glanced round the cell. The movement in the shadows had been arrested; they trembled though, like greyhounds awaiting release. Heart hammering, he carried Billy back to his bunk, and laid him down. There was no sign of consciousness returning; the boy lay limply on the mattress while Cleve tore up his sheet, and gagged him, thrusting a ball of fabric into the boy's mouth to prevent him making a sound behind his gag. He then preceded to tie Billy to the bunk, using both his own belt and the boy's, supplemented with further makeshift bindings of torn sheets. It took several minutes to finish the job. As Cleve was lashing the boy's legs together, he began to stir. His eyes flickered open, full of puzzlement. Then, realizing his situation, he began to thrash his head from side to side; there was little else he could do to signal his protest.

"No, Billy," Cleve murmured to him, throwing a blanket across his bound body to keep the fact from any officer who might look in through the spy-hole before morning, "Tonight, you don't bring him. Everything I said was true, boy. He wants out; and he's using you to escape." Cleve took hold of Billy's head, fingers pressed against his cheeks. "He's not your friend. / am. Always have been." Billy tried to shake his head from Cleve's grip, but couldn't. "Don't waste your energy," Cleve advised, “it's going to be a long night."

He left the boy on the bunk, crossed the cell to the wall, and slid down it to sit on his haunches and watch. He would stay awake until dawn, and then, when there was some light to think by, he'd work out his next move. For now, he was content that his crude tactics had worked.

The boy had stopped trying to fight; he had clearly realised the bonds were too expertly tied to be loosened. A kind of calm descended on the cell: Cleve sitting in the patch of light that fell through the window, the boy lying in the gloom of the lower bunk, breathing steadily through his nostrils. Cleve glanced at his watch. It was

twelve-fifty-four. When was morning? He didn't know. Five hours, at least. He put his head back, and stared at the light. It mesmerised him. The minutes ticked by slowly but steadily, and the light did not change. Sometimes an officer would advance along the landing, and Billy, hearing the footsteps, would begin his struggling afresh. But nobody looked into the cell. The two prisoners were left to their thoughts; Cleve to wonder if there would ever come a time when he could be free of the shadow behind him, Billy to think whatever thoughts came to bound monsters. And still the dead-of-night minutes went, minutes that crept across the mind like dutiful schoolchildren, one upon the heels of the next, and after sixty had passed that sum was called an hour. And dawn was closer by that span, wasn't it? But then so was death, and so, presumably, the end of the world: that glorious Last Trump of which The Bishop had spoken so fondly, when the dead men under the lawn outside would rise as fresh as yesterday's bread and go out to meet their Maker. And sitting there against the wall, listening to Billy's inhalations and exhalations, and watching the light in the glass and through the glass, Cleve knew without doubt that even if he escaped this trap, it was only a temporary respite; that this long night, its minutes, its hours, were a foretaste of a longer vigil. He almost despaired then; felt his soul sink into a hole from which there seemed to be no hope of retrieval. Here was the real world, he wept. Not joy, not light, not looking forward; only this waiting in ignorance, without hope, even of fear, for fear came only to those with dreams to lose. The hole was deep and dim. He peered up out of it at the light through the window, and his thoughts became one wretched round. He forgot the bunk and the boy lying there. He forgot the numbness that had overtaken his legs. He might, given time, have forgotten even the simple act of taking breath, but for the smell of urine that pricked him from his fugue.

He looked towards the bunk. The boy was voiding his bladder; but that act was simply a symptom of something else altogether. Beneath the blanket, Billy's body was moving in a dozen ways that his bonds should have prevented. It took Cleve a few moments to shake off lethargy, and seconds more to realize what was happening. Billy was changing.

Cleve tried to stand upright, but his lower limbs were dead from sitting so still for so long. He almost fell forward across the cell, and only prevented himself by throwing out an arm to grasp the chair. His eyes were glued to the gloom of the lower bunk. The movements were increasing in scale and complexity. The blanket was pitched off. Beneath it Billy's body was already beyond recognition; the same terrible procedure as he had seen before, but in reverse. Matter

gathering in buzzing clouds about the body, and congealing into atrocious forms. Limbs and organs summoned from the ineffable, teeth shaping themselves like needles and plunging into place in a head grown large and swelling still. He begged for Billy to stop, but with every drawn breath there was less of humanity to appeal to. The strength the boy had lacked was granted to the beast; it had already broken almost all its constraints, and now, as Cleve watched, it struggled free of the last, and rolled off the bunk onto the floor of the cell.

Cleve backed off towards the door, his eyes scanning Billy's mutated form. He remembered his mother's horror at earwigs and saw something of that insect in this anatomy: the way it bent its shiny back upon itself, exposing the paddling intracies that lined its abdomen. Elsewhere, no analogy offered a hold on the sight. Its head was rife with tongues, that licked its eyes clean in place of lids, and ran back and forth across its teeth, wetting and re-wetting them constantly; from seeping holes along its flanks came a sewer stench. Yet even now there was a residue of something human trapped in this foulness, its rumour only serving to heighten the filth of the whole. Seeing its hooks and its spines Cleve remembered Lowell's rising scream; and felt his own throat pulse, ready to loose a sound its equal should the beast turn on him.

But Billy had other intentions. He moved – limbs in horrible array – to the window, and clambered up, pressing his head against the glass like a leech. The music he made was not like his previous song – but Cleve had no doubt it was the same summoning. He turned to the door, and began to beat upon it, hoping that Billy would be too distracted with his call to turn on him before assistance came.

"Quickly! For Christ's sake! Quickly!" He yelled as loudly exhaustion would allow, and glanced over his shoulder once to see if Billy was coming for him. He was not; he was still clamped to the window, though his call had all but faltered. Its purpose was achieved. Darkness was tyrant in the cell.

Panicking, Cleve turned back to the door and renewed his tattoo. There was somebody running along the landing now; he could hear shouts and imprecations from other cells. "Jesus Christ, help me!" he shouted. He could feel a chill at his back. He didn't need to turn to know what was happening behind him. The shadow growing, the wall dissolving so that the city and its occupant could come through. Tait was here. He could feel the man's presence, vast and dark. Tait the child-killer, Tait the shadow-thing, Tait the transformer. Cleve beat on

the door 'til his hands bled. The feet seemed a continent away. Were they coming? Were they coming?

The chill behind him became a blast. He saw his shadow thrown up on to the door by flickering blue light; smelt sand and blood.

And then, the voice. Not the boy, but that of his grandfather, of Edgar St Clair Tait. This was the man who had pronounced himself the Devil's excrement, and hearing that abhorrent voice Cleve believed both in Hell and its master, believed himself already in the bowels of Satan, a witness to its wonders.

"You are too inquisitive." Edgar said, "It's time you went to bed."

Cleve didn't want to turn. The last thought in his head was that he should turn and look at the speaker. But he was no longer subject to his own will; Tait had fingers in his head and was dabbling there. He turned, and looked. The hanged man was in the cell. He was not that beast Cleve had half-seen, that face of pulp and eggs. He was here in the flesh; dressed for another age, and not without charm. His face was well-made; his brow wide, his eyes unflinching. He still wore his wedding-ring on the hand that stroked Billy's bowed head like that of a pet dog. Time to die, Mr. Smith," he said.

On the landing outside, Cleve heard Devlin shouting. He had no breath left to answer with. But he heard keys in the lock or was that some illusion his mind had made to placate his panic?

The tiny cell was full of wind. It threw over the chair and table, and lifted the sheets into the air like childhood ghosts. And now it took Tait, and the boy with him; sucked them back into the receding perspectives of the city. "Come on now -" Tait demanded, his face corrupting, “we need you, body and soul. Come with us, Mr. Smith. We won't be denied."

"No!" Cleve yelled back at his tormentor. The suction was plucking at his fingers, at his eye-balls. "I won't -“ Behind him, the door was rattling.

"I won't, you hear!"

Suddenly, the door was thrust open, and threw him forward into the vortex of fog and dust that was sucking Tait and his grandchild away. He almost went with them, but that a hand grabbed at his shirt, and dragged him back from the brink, even as consciousness gave itself up.

Somewhere, far away, Devlin began to laugh like a hyena. He's lost his mind, Cleve decided; and the image his darkening thoughts evoked was one of the contents of Devlin's brain escaping, through his mouth as a flock of flying dogs.

He awoke in dreams; and in the city. Woke remembering his last conscious moments: Devlin's hysteria, the hand arresting his fall as the two figures were sucked away in front of him. He had followed them, it seemed, unable to prevent his comatose mind from retreading the familiar route to the murderers' metropolis. But Tait had not won yet. He was still only dreaming his presence here. His corporeal self was still in Pentonville; his dislocation from it informed his every step.

He listened to the wind. It was eloquent as ever: the voices coming and going with each gritty gust, but never, even when the wind died to a whisper, disappearing entirely. As he listened, he heard a shout. In this mute city the sound was a shock; it startled rats from their nests and birds up from some secluded plaza.

Curious, he pursued the sound, whose echoes were almost traced on the air. As he hurried down the empty streets he heard further raised voices, and now men and women were appearing at the doors and windows of their cells. So many faces, and nothing in common between one and the next to confirm the hopes of a physiognomist. Murder had as many faces as it had occurrences. The only common quality was one of wretchedness, of minds despairing after an age at the site of their crime. He glanced at them as he went, sufficiently distracted by their looks not to notice where the shout was leading him until he found himself once more in the ghetto to which he had been led by the child.

Now he rounded a corner and at the end of the cul-de-sac he'd seen from his previous visit here (the wall, the window, the bloody chamber beyond) he saw Billy, writhing in the sand at Tait's feet. The boy was half himself and half that beast he had become in front of Cleve's eyes. The better part was convulsing in its attempt to climb free of the other, but without success. In one moment the boy's body would surface, white and frail, only to be subsumed the next into the flux of transformation. Was that an arm forming, and being snatched away again before it could gain fingers?; was that a face pressed from the house of tongues that was the beast's head? The sight defied analysis. As soon as Cleve fixed upon some recognizable feature it was drowned again.

Edgar Tait looked up from the struggle in front of him, and bared

his teeth at Cleve. It was a display a shark might have envied.

"He doubted me, Mr. Smith…" the monster said,"… and came looking for his cell."

A mouth appeared from the patchwork on the sand and gave out a sharp cry, full of pain and terror. "Now he wants to be away from me," Tait said, "You sewed the doubt. He must suffer the consequences." He pointed a trembling finger at Cleve, and in the act of pointing the limb transformed, flesh becoming bruised leather. "You came where you were not wanted, and look at the agonies you've brought."

Tait kicked the thing at his feet. It rolled over on to its back, vomiting.

"He needs me," Tait said. "Don't you have the sense to see that? Without me, he's lost."

Cleve didn't reply to the hanged man, but instead addressed the beast on the sand.

"Billy?" he said, calling the boy out of the flux.

"Lost," Tait said.

"Billy…" Cleve repeated. "Listen to me…"

"He won't go back now," Tait said. "You're just dreaming this. But he's here, in the flesh."

"Billy," Cleve persevered, "Do you hear me. It's me; it's Cleve."

The boy seemed to pause in its gyrations for an instant, as if hearing the appeal. Cleve said Billy's name again, and again.

It was one of the first skills the human child learned: to call itself something. If anything could reach the boy it was surely his own name.

"Billy… Billy…" At the repeated word, the body rolled itself over.

Tait seemed to have become uneasy. The confidence he'd displayed was now silenced. His body was darkening, the head becoming bulbous. Cleve tried to keep his eyes off the subtle distortions in Edgar's anatomy and concentrate on winning back Billy. The repetition of the name was paying dividends; the beast was being subdued. Moment by moment there was more of the boy emerging. He

looked pitiful; skin-and-bones on the black sand. But his face was almost reconstructed now, and his eyes were on Cleve.

"Billy…?"

He nodded. His hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat; his limbs were in spasm.

"You know where you are? Who you are?"

At first it seemed as though comprehension escaped the boy. And then – by degrees – recognition formed in his eyes, and with it came a terror of the man standing over him.

Cleve glanced up at Tait. In the few seconds since he had last looked all but a few human characteristics had been erased from his head and upper torso, revealing corruptions more profound than those of his grandchild. Billy gazed up over his shoulder like a whipped dog.

"YOU belong to me," Tait pronounced, through features barely capable of speech. Billy saw the limbs descending to snatch at him, and rose from his prone position to escape them, but he was too tardy. Cleve saw the spiked hook of Tait's limb wrap itself around Billy's neck, and draw him close. Blood leapt from the slit windpipe, and with it the whine of escaping air.

Cleve yelled.

"With me," Tait said, the words deteriorating into gibberish.

Suddenly the narrow cul-de-sac was filling up with brightness, and the boy and Tait and the city were being bleached out. Cleve tried to hold on to them, but they were slipping from him; and in their place another concrete reality: a light, a face (faces) and a voice calling him out of one absurdity and into another.

The doctor's hand was on his face. It felt clammy.

"What on earth were you dreaming about?" he asked, the perfect idiot.

Billy had gone.

Of all the mysteries that the Governor – and Devlin and the other officers who had stepped into cell B. at 3.20 that night – had to face, the total disappearance of William Tait from an unbreached cell was

the most perplexing. Of the vision that had set Devlin giggling like a loon nothing was said; easier to believe in some collective delusion than that they'd seen some objective reality. When Cleve attempted to articulate the events of that night, and of the many nights previous to that, his monologue, interrupted often by his tears and silences, was met with feigned understanding and sideways glances. He told the story over several times, however, despite their condescension, and they, looking no doubt for a clue amongst his lunatic fables as to the reality of Billy Tait's Houdini act, attended every word. When they found nothing amongst his tales to advance their investigations, they began to lose their tempers with him. Consolation was replaced with threats. They demanded, voices louder each time they asked the question, where Billy had gone. Cleve answered the only way he knew how. "To the city," he told them, “he's a murderer, you see."

"And his body?" the Governor said. "Where do you suppose his body is?"

Cleve didn't know, and said so. It wasn't until much later, four full days later in fact, that he was standing by the window watching the gardening detail bearing this spring's plantings cross between wings, that he remembered the lawn.

He found Mayflower, who had been returned to B Wing in lieu of Devlin, and told the officer the thought that had come to him. "He's in the grave," he said. "He's with his grandfather. Smoke and shadow."

They dug up the coffin by cover of night, an elaborate shield of poles and tarpaulins erected to keep proceedings from prying eyes, and lamps, bright as day but not so warm, trained on the labours of the men volunteered as an exhumation party. Cleve's answer to the riddle of Tait's disappearance had met with almost universal bafflement, but no explanation – however absurd – was being overlooked in a mystery so intractable. Thus they gathered at the unmarked grave to turn earth that looked not to have been disturbed in five decades: the Governor, a selection of Home Office officials; a pathologist and Devlin. One of the doctors, believing that Cleve's morbid delusion would be best countered if he viewed the contents of the coffin, and saw his error with his own eyes, convinced the Governor that Cleve should also be numbered amongst the spectators.

There was little in the confines of Edgar St Clair Tait's coffin that Cleve had not seen before. The corpse of the murderer – returned here (as smoke perhaps?) neither quite beast nor quite human, and preserved, as The Bishop had promised, as undecayed as the day of his

execution – shared the coffin with Billy Tait, who lay, naked as a babe, in his grandfather's embrace. Edgar's corrupted limb was still wound around Billy's neck, and the walls of the coffin were dark with congealed blood. But Billy's face was not besmirched. He looks like a doll, one of the doctors observed. Cleve wanted to reply that no doll had such tear stains on its cheeks, nor such despair in its eyes, but the thought refused to become words.

Cleve was released from Pentonville three weeks later after special application to the Parole Board, with only two thirds of his sentence completed. He returned, within half a year, to the only profession that he had ever known. Any hope he might have had of release from his dreams was short-lived. The place was with him still: neither so focused nor so easily traversed now that Billy – whose mind had opened that door – was gone, but still a potent terror, the lingering presence of which wearied Cleve.

Sometimes the dreams would almost recede completely, only to return again with terrible potency. It took Cleve several months before he began to grasp the pattern of this vacillation. People brought the dream to him. If he spent time with somebody who had murderous intentions, the city came back. Nor were such people so rare. As he grew more sensitive to the lethal streak in those around him he found himself scarcely able to walk the street. They were everywhere, these embryonic killers; people wearing smart clothes and sunny expressions were striding the pavement and imagining, as they strode, the deaths of their employers and their spouses, of soap-opera stars and incompetent tailors. The world had murder on its mind, and he could no longer bear its thoughts. Only heroin offered some release from the burden of experience. He had never done much intravenous H, but it rapidly became heaven and earth to him. It was an expensive addiction however, and one which his increasingly truncated circle of professional contacts could scarcely hope to finance. It was a man called Grimm, a fellow addict so desperate to avoid reality he could get high on fermented milk, who suggested that Cleve might want to do some work to earn him a fee the equal of his appetite. It seemed like a wise idea. A meeting was arranged, and a proposal put. The fee for the job was so high it could not be refused by a man so in need of money. The job, of course, was murder.

"There are no visitors here; only prospective citizens." He had been told that once, though he no longer quite remembered by whom, and he believed in prophecies. If he didn't commit murder now, it would only be a matter of time until he did.

But, though the details of the assassination which he undertook had a terrible familiarity to him, he had not anticipated the collision of circumstances by which he ended fleeing from the scene of his crime barefoot, and running so hard on pavement and tarmac that by the time the police cornered him and shot him down his feet were bloody, and ready at last to tread the streets of the city – just as he had in dreams.

The room he'd killed in was waiting for him, and he lived there, hiding his head from any who appeared in the street outside, for several months. (He assumed time passed here, by the beard he'd grown; though sleep came seldom, and day never.) After a while, however, he braved the cool wind and the butterflies and took himself off to the city perimeters, where the houses petered out and the desert took over. He went, not to see the dunes, but to listen to the voices that came always, rising and falling, like the howls of jackals or children.

He stayed there a long while, and the wind conspired with the desert to bury him. But he was not disappointed with the fruit of his vigil. For one day (or year), he saw a man come to the place and drop a gun in the sand, then wander out into the desert, where, after a while, the makers of the voices came to meet him, loping and wild, dancing on their crutches. They surrounded him, laughing. He went with them, laughing. And though distance and the wind smudged the sight, Cleve was certain he saw the man picked up by one of the celebrants, and taken on to its shoulders as a boy, thence snatched into another's arms as a baby, until, at the limit of his senses, he heard the man bawl as he was delivered back into life. He went away content, knowing at last how sin (and he) had come into the world.

XXVI: THE LAST ILLUSION

What happened then – when the magician, having mesmerised the caged tiger, pulled the tasseled cord that released a dozen swords upon its head – was the subject of heated argument both in the bar of the theatre and later, when Swann's performance was over, on the sidewalk of 51st Street. Some claimed to have glimpsed the bottom of the cage opening in the split second that all other eyes were on the descending blades, and seen the tiger swiftly spirited away as the woman in the red dress took its place behind the lacquered bars. Others were just as adamant that the animal had never been in the cage to begin with, its presence merely a projection which had been extinguished as a mechanism propelled the woman from beneath the stage; this, of course, at such a speed that it deceived the eye of all but those swift and suspicious enough to catch it. And the swords? The nature of the trick which had transformed them in the mere seconds of their gleaming descent from steel to rose-petals was yet further fuel for debate. The explanations ranged from the prosaic to the elaborate, but few of the throng that left the theatre lacked some theory. Nor did the arguments finish there, on the sidewalk. They raged on, no doubt, in the apartments and restaurants of New York.

The pleasure to be had from Swann's illusions was, it seemed, twofold. First: the spectacle of the trick itself – in the breathless moment when disbelief was, if not suspended, at least taken on tip-toe. And second, when the moment was over and logic restored, in the debate as to how the trick had been achieved.

"How do you do it, Mr. Swann?" Barbara Bernstein was eager to know.

"It's magic," Swann replied. He had invited her backstage to examine the tiger's cage for any sign of fakery in its construction; she had found none. She had examined the swords: they were lethal. And the petals, fragrant. Still she insisted: "Yes, but really…" she leaned close to him. "You can tell me," she said, "I promise I won't breathe a word to a soul."

He returned her a slow smile in place of a reply.

"Oh, I know…"she said, “you're going to tell me that you've signed some kind of oath."

"That's right," Swann said.

"- And you're forbidden to give away any trade secrets."

"The intention is to give you pleasure," he told her. "Have I failed in that?"

"Oh no," she replied, without a moment's hesitation. "Everybody's talking about the show. You're the toast of New York."

"No," he protested.

"Truly," she said, "I know people who would give their eye-teeth to get into this theatre. And to have a guided tour backstage… well, I'll be the envy of everybody."

"I'm pleased," he said, and touched her face. She had clearly been anticipating such a move on his part. It would be something else for her to boast of: her seduction by the man critics had dubbed the Magus of Manhattan. "I'd like to make love to you," he whispered to her.

"Here?" she said.

"No," he told her. "Not within ear-shot of the tigers."

She laughed. She preferred her lovers twenty years Swann's junior – he looked, someone had observed, like a man in mourning for his profile, but his touch promised wit no boy could offer. She liked the tang of dissolution she sensed beneath his gentlemanly facade. Swann was a dangerous man. If she turned him down she might never find another. "We could go to a hotel," she suggested.

"A hotel," he said, “is a good idea."

A look of doubt had crossed her face.

"What about your wife…?" she said. "We might be seen."

He took her hand. "Shall we be invisible, then?"

"I'm serious."

"So am I," he insisted. "Take it from me; seeing is not believing. I should know. It's the cornerstone of my profession." She did not look much reassured. "If anyone recognises us," he told her, "I'll simply tell them their eyes are playing tricks."

She smiled at this, and he kissed her. She returned the kiss with

unquestionable fervor.

"Miraculous," he said, when their mouths parted. "Shall we go before the tigers gossip?"

He led her across the stage. The cleaners had not yet got about their business, and there, lying on the boards, was a litter of rose-buds. Some had been trampled, a few had not. Swann took his hand from hers, and walked across to where the flowers lay.

She watched him stoop to pluck a rose from the ground, enchanted by the gesture, but before he could stand upright again something in the air above him caught her eye. She looked up and her gaze met a slice of silver that was even now plunging towards him. She made to warn him, but the sword was quicker than her tongue. At the last possible moment he seemed to sense the danger he was in and looked round, the bud in his hand, as the point met his back. The sword's momentum carried it through his body to the hilt. Blood fled from his chest, and splashed the floor. He made no sound, but fell forward, forcing two-thirds of the sword's length out of his body again as he hit the stage. She would have screamed, but that her attention was claimed by a sound from the clutter of magical apparatus arrayed in the wings behind her, a muttered growl which was indisputably the voice of the tiger. She froze. There were probably instructions on how best to stare down rogue tigers, but as a Manhattanite born and bred they were techniques she wasn't acquainted with.

"Swann?" she said, hoping this yet might be some baroque illusion staged purely for her benefit. "Swann. Please get up."

But the magician only lay where he had fallen, the pool spreading from beneath him.

"If this is a joke -" she said testily,"- I'm not amused." When he didn't rise to her remark she tried a sweeter tactic. "Swann, my sweet, I'd like to go now, if you don't mind."

The growl came again. She didn't want to turn and seek out its source, but equally she didn't want to be sprung upon from behind.

Cautiously she looked round. The wings were in darkness. The clutter of properties kept her from working out the precise location of the beast. She could hear it still, however: its tread, its growl. Step by step, she retreated towards the apron of the stage. The closed curtains sealed her off from the auditorium, but she hoped she might scramble under them before the tiger reached her.

As she backed against the heavy fabric, one of the shadows in the wings forsook its ambiguity, and the animal appeared. It was not beautiful, as she had thought it when behind bars. It was vast and lethal and hungry. She went down on her haunches and reached for the hem of the curtain. The fabric was heavily weighted, and she had more difficulty lifting it than she'd expected, but she had managed to slide halfway under the drape when, head and hands pressed to the boards, she sensed the thump of the tiger's advance. An instant later she felt the splash of its breath on her bare back, and screamed as it hooked its talons into her body and hauled her from the sight of safety towards its steaming jaws.

Even then, she refused to give up her life. She kicked at it, and tore out its fur in handfuls, and delivered a hail of punches to its snout. But her resistance was negligible in the face of such authority; her assault, for all its ferocity, did not slow the beast a jot. It ripped open her body with one casual clout. Mercifully, with that first wound her senses gave up all claim to verisimilitude, and took instead to preposterous invention. It seemed to her that she heard applause from somewhere, and the roar of an approving audience, and that in place of the blood that was surely springing from her body there came fountains of sparkling light. The agony her nerve-endings were suffering didn't touch her at all. Even when the animal had divided her into three or four parts her head lay on its side at the edge of the stage and watched as her torso was mauled and her limbs devoured.

And all the while, when she wondered how all this could be possible – that her eyes could live to witness this last supper – the only reply she could think of was Swann's: "It's magic," he'd said.

Indeed, she was thinking that very thing, that this must be magic, when the tiger ambled across to her head, and swallowed it down in one bite.

Amongst a certain set Harry D'Amour liked to believe he had some small reputation – a coterie which did not, alas, include his ex-wife, his creditors or those anonymous critics who regularly posted dogs' excrement through his office letterbox. But the woman who was on the phone now, her voice so full of grief she might have been crying for half a year, and was about to begin again, she knew him for the paragon he was.

"-I need your help, Mr. D'Amour; very badly."

"I'm busy on several cases at the moment," he told her. "Maybe you

could come to the office?" "I can't leave the house," the woman informed him. "I'll explain everything. Please come."

He was sorely tempted. But there were several out- standing cases, one of which, if not solved soon, might end in fratricide. He suggested she try elsewhere.

"I can't go to just anybody," the woman insisted.

"Why me?"

"I read about you. About what happened in Brooklyn."

Making mention of his most conspicuous failure was not the surest method of securing his services, Harry thought, but it certainly got his attention. What had happened in Wyckoff Street had begun innocently enough, with a husband who'd employed him to spy on his adulterous wife, and had ended on the top storey of the Lomax house with the world he thought he'd known turning inside out. When the body-count was done, and the surviving priests dispatched, he was left with a fear of stairs, and more questions than he'd ever answer this side of the family plot. He took no pleasure in being reminded of those terrors.

"I don't like to talk about Brooklyn," he said.

"Forgive me," the woman replied, “but I need somebody who has experience with… with the occult." She stopped speaking for a moment. He could still hear her breath down the line: soft, but erratic. "I need you," she said. He had already decided, in that pause when only her fear had been audible, what reply he would make. "I'll come."

"I'm grateful to you," she said. "The house is on East 61st Street -” He scribbled down the details. Her last words were, "Please hurry." Then she put down the phone.

He made some calls, in the vain hope of placating two of his more excitable clients, then pulled on his jacket, locked the office, and started downstairs. The landing and the lobby smelt pungent. As he reached the front door he caught Chaplin, the janitor, emerging from the basement.

"This place stinks," he told the man.

"It's disinfectant."

"It's cat's piss," Harry said. "Get something done about it, will you?

I've got a reputation to protect." He left the man laughing.

The brownstone on East 61st Street was in pristine condition. He stood on the scrubbed step, sweaty and sour breathed, and felt like a slob. The expression on the face that met him when the door opened did nothing to dissuade him of that opinion.

"Yes?" it wanted to know.

"I'm Harry D'Amour," he said. "I got a call."

The man nodded. "You'd better come in," he said without enthusiasm.

It was cooler in than out; and sweeter. The place reeked of perfume. Harry followed the disapproving face down the hallway and into a large room, on the other side of which – across an oriental carpet that had everything woven into its pattern but the price – sat a widow. She didn't suit black; nor tears. She stood up and offered her hand. "Mr. D'Amour?"

"Yes."

"Valentin will get you something to drink if you'd like."

"Please. M ilk, if you have it." His belly had been jittering for the last hour; since her talk of Wyckoff Street, in fact. Valentin retired from the room, not taking his beady eyes off Harry until the last possible moment. "Somebody died," said Harry, once the man had gone.

"That's right," the widow said, sitting down again. At her invitation he sat opposite her, amongst enough cushions to furnish a harem. "My husband."

"I'm sorry."

"There's no time to be sorry," she said, her every look and gesture betraying her words. He was glad of her grief; the tearstains and the fatigue blemished a beauty which, had he seen it unimpaired, might have rendered him dumb with admiration.

"They say that my husband's death was an accident," she was saying. "I know it wasn't."

"May I ask… your name?"

"I'm sorry. My name is Swann, Mr. D'Amour. Dorothea Swann. You may have heard of my husband?" The magician?"

"Illusionist," she said.

"I read about it. Tragic."

"Did you ever see his performance?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't afford Broadway, Mrs Swann."

"We were only over for three months, while his show ran. We were going back in September…" "Back?"

"To Hamburg," she said, "I don't like this city. It's too hot. And too cruel."

"Don't blame New York," he said. "It can't help itself."

"Maybe," she replied, nodding. "Perhaps what happened to Swann would have happened anyway, wherever we'd been. People keep telling me: it was an accident. That's all. Just an accident." "But you don't believe it?" Valentin had appeared with a glass of milk. He set it down on the table in front of Harry. As he made to leave, she said: "Valentin. The letter?"

He looked at her strangely, almost as though she'd said something obscene.

"The letter," she repeated.

He exited.

"You were saying -"

She frowned. "What?"

"About it being an accident."

"Oh yes. I lived with Swann seven and a half years, and I got to understand him as well as anybody ever could. I learned to sense when he wanted me around, and when he didn't. When he didn't, I'd take myself off somewhere and let him have his privacy. Genius needs privacy. And he was a genius, you know. The greatest illusionist since Houdini."

"Is that so?"

"I'd think sometimes – it was a kind of miracle that he let me into his life…"

Harry wanted to say Swann would have been mad not to have done so, but the comment was inappropriate. She didn't want blandishments; didn't need them. Didn't need anything, perhaps, but her husband alive again. "Now I think I didn't know him at all," she went on, "I didn't understand him. I think maybe it was another trick. Another part of his magic."

"I called him a magician a while back," Harry said. "You corrected me."

"So I did," she said, conceding his point with an apologetic look. "Forgive me. That was Swann talking. He hated to be called a magician. He said that was a word that had to be kept for miracle-workers."

"And he was no miracle-worker?"

"He used to call himself the Great Pretender," she said. The thought made her smile.

Valentin had re-appeared, his lugubrious features rife with suspicion. He carried an envelope, which he clearly had no desire to give up. Dorothea had to cross the carpet and take it from his hands.

"Is this wise?" he said.

"Yes," she told him.

He turned on his heel and made a smart withdrawal. "He's grief-stricken," she said. "Forgive him his behaviour. He was with Swann from the beginning of his career. I think he loved my husband as much as I did." She ran her linger down into the envelope and pulled the letter out. The paper was pale yellow, and gossamer- thin. "A few hours after he died, this letter was delivered here by hand," she said. "It was addressed to him. I opened it. I think you ought to read it." She passed it to him.

The hand it was written in was solid and unaffected.

Dorothea, he had written, if you are reading this, then I am dead. You know how little store I set by dreams and premonitions and such; but for the last few days strange thoughts have just crept into my head, and I have the suspicion that death is very close to me. If so, so.

There's no help for it. Don't waste time trying to puzzle out the whys and wherefores; they're old news now. Just know that I love you, and that I have always loved you in my way. I'm sorry for whatever unhappiness I've caused, or am causing now, but it was out of my hands. I have some instructions regarding the disposal of my body. Please adhere to them to the letter. Don't let anybody try to persuade you out of doing as I ask. I want you to have my body watched night and day until I'm cremated. Don't try and take my remains back to Europe. Have me cremated here, as soon as possible, then throw the ashes in the East River. My sweet darling, I'm afraid. Not of bad dreams, or of what might happen to me in this life, but of what my enemies may try to do once I'm dead. You know how critics can be: they wait until you can't fight them back, then they start the character assassinations. It's too long a business to try and explain all of this, so I must simply trust you to do as I say. Again, I love you, and I hope you never have to read this letter.

Your adoring, Swann.

"Some farewell note," Harry commented when he'd read it through twice. He folded it up and passed it back to the widow.

"I'd like you to stay with him," she said. "Corpse-sit, if you will. Just until all the legal formalities are dealt with and I can make arrangements for his cremation. It shouldn't take them long. I've got a lawyer working on it now." "Again: why me?"

She avoided his gaze. "As he says in the letter, he was never superstitious. But I am. I believe in omens. And there was an odd atmosphere about the place in the days before he died. As if we were watched."

"You think he was murdered?"

She mused on this, then said: "I don't believe it was an accident."

"These enemies he talks about…"

"He was a great man. Much envied."

"Professional jealousy? Is that a motive for murder?"

"Anything can be a motive, can't it?" she said.

"People get killed for the colour of their eyes, don't they?"

Harry was impressed. It had taken him twenty years to learn how arbitrary things were. She spoke it as conventional wisdom.

"Where is your husband?" he asked her.

"Upstairs," she said. "I had the body brought back here, where I could look after him. I can't pretend I understand what's going on, but I'm not going to risk ignoring his instructions."

Harry nodded.

"Swann was my life," she added softly, apropos of nothing; and everything.

She took him upstairs. The perfume that had met him at the door intensified. The master bedroom had been turned into a Chapel of Rest, knee-deep in sprays and wreaths of every shape and variety; their mingled scents verged on the hallucinogenic. In the midst of this abundance, the casket – an elaborate affair in black and silver – was mounted on trestles. The upper half of the lid stood open, the plush overlay folded back. At Dorothea's invitation he waded through the tributes to view the deceased. He liked Swann's face; it had humour, and a certain guile; it was even handsome in its weary way. More: it had inspired the love of Dorothea; a face could have few better recommendations. Harry stood waist-high in flowers and, absurd as it was, felt a twinge of envy for the love this man must have enjoyed.

"Will you help me, Mr. D'Amour?"

What could he say but: "Yes, of course I'll help." That, and: "Call me Harry."

He would be missed at Wing's Pavilion tonight. He had occupied the best table there every Friday night for the past six and a half years, eating at one sitting enough to compensate for what his diet lacked in excellence and variety the other six days of the week. This feast – the best Chinese cuisine to be had south of Canal Street – came gratis, thanks to services he had once rendered the owner. Tonight the table would go empty.

Not that his stomach suffered. He had only been sitting with Swann an hour or so when Valentin came up and said: "How do you like your steak?"

"Just shy of burned," Harry replied.

Valentin was none too pleased by the response. "I hate to overcook good steak," he said.

"And I hate the sight of blood," Harry said, “even if it isn't my own."

The chef clearly despaired of his guest's palate, and turned to go.

"Valentin?"

The man looked round.

"Is that your Christian name?" Harry asked.

"Christian names are for Christians," came the reply.

Harry nodded. "You don't like my being here, am I right?"

Valentin made no reply. His eyes had drifted past Harry to the open coffin.

"I'm not going to be here for long," Harry said, “but while I am, can't we be friends?"

Valentin's gaze found him once more.

"I don't have any friends," he said without enmity or self-pity. "Not now."

"OK. I'm sorry."

"What's to be sorry for?" Valentin wanted to know. "Swann's dead. It's all over, bar the shouting." The doleful face stoically refused tears. A stone would weep sooner, Harry guessed. But there was grief there, and all the more acute for being dumb.

"One question."

"Only one?"

"Why didn't you want me to read his letter?"

Valentin raised his eyebrows slightly; they were fine enough to have been penciled on. "He wasn't insane," he said. "I didn't want you thinking he was a crazy man, because of what he wrote. What you read you keep to yourself. Swann was a legend. I don't want his memory besmirched."

"You should write a book," Harry said. "Tell the whole story once and for all. You were with him a long time, I hear."

"Oh yes," said Valentin. "Long enough to know better than to tell the truth."

So saying he made an exit, leaving the flowers to wilt, and Harry with more puzzles on his hands than he'd begun with.

Twenty minutes later, Valentin brought up a tray of food: a large salad, bread, wine, and the steak. It was one degree short of charcoal.

"Just the way I like it," Harry said, and set to guzzling.

He didn't see Dorothea Swann, though God knows he thought about her often enough. Every time he heard a whisper on the stairs, or footsteps along the carpeted landing, he hoped her face would appear at the door, an invitation on her lips. Not perhaps the most appropriate of thoughts, given the proximity of her husband's corpse, but what would the illusionist care now? He was dead and gone. If he had any generosity of spirit he wouldn't want to see his widow drown in her grief.

Harry drank the half-carafe of wine Valentin had brought, and when – three-quarters of an hour later – the man reappeared with coffee and Calvados, he told him to leave the bottle.

Nightfall was near. The traffic was noisy on Lexington and Third. Out of boredom he took to watching the street from the window. Two lovers feuded loudly on the sidewalk, and only stopped when a brunette with a hare-lip and a pekinese stood watching them shamelessly. There were preparations for a party in the brownstone opposite: he watched a table lovingly laid, and candles lit. After a time the spying began to depress him, so he called Valentin and asked if there was a portable television he could have access to. No sooner said than provided, and for the next two hours he sat with the small black and white monitor on the floor amongst the orchids and the lilies, watching whatever mindless entertainment it offered, the silver luminescence flickering on the blooms like excitable moonlight.

A quarter after midnight, with the party across the street in full swing, Valentin came up. "You want a night-cap?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Milk; or something stronger?"

"Something stronger."

He produced a bottle of fine cognac, and two glasses. Together they toasted the dead man.

"Mr. Swann."

"Mr. Swann."

"If you need anything more tonight," Valentin said, "I'm in the room directly above. Mrs Swann is down- stairs, so if you hear somebody moving about, don't worry. She doesn't sleep well these nights."

"Who does?" Harry replied.

Valentin left him to his vigil. Harry heard the man's tread on the stairs, and then the creaking of floorboards on the level above. He returned his attention to the television, but he'd lost the thread of the movie he'd been watching. It was a long stretch 'til dawn; meanwhile New York would be having itself a fine Friday night: dancing, fighting, fooling around. The picture on the television set began to flicker. He stood up, and started to walk across to the set, but he never got there. Two steps from the chair where he'd been sitting the picture folded up and went out altogether, plunging the room into total darkness. Harry briefly had time to register that no light was finding its way through the windows from the street. Then the insanity began.

Something moved in the blackness: vague forms rose and fell. It took him a moment to recognise them. The flowers! Invisible hands were tearing the wreaths and tributes apart, and tossing the blossoms up into the air. He followed their descent, but they didn't hit the ground. It seemed the floorboards had lost all faith in themselves, and disappeared, so the blossoms just kept falling – down, down – through the floor of the room below, and through the basement floor, away to God alone knew what destination. Fear gripped Harry, like some old dope-pusher promising a terrible high. Even those few boards that remained beneath his feet were becoming insubstantial. In seconds he would go the way of the blossoms.

He reeled around to locate the chair he'd got up from – some fixed point in this vertiginous nightmare. The chair was still there; he could just discern its form in the gloom. With torn blossoms raining down upon him he reached for it, but even as his hand took hold of the arm, the floor beneath the chair gave up the ghost, and now, by a ghastly light that was thrown up from the pit that yawned beneath his feet, Harry saw it tumble away into Hell, turning over and over 'til it was

pin-prick small. Then it was gone; and the flowers were gone, and the walls and the windows and every damn thing was gone but him.

Not quite everything. Swann's casket remained, its lid still standing open, its overlay neatly turned back like the sheet on a child's bed. The trestle had gone, as had the floor beneath the trestle. But the casket floated in the dark air for all the world like some morbid illusion, while from the depths a rumbling sound accompanied the trick like the roll of a snare- drum.

Harry felt the last solidity failing beneath him; felt the pit call. Even as his feet left the ground, that ground faded to nothing, and for a terrifying moment he hung over the Gulfs, his hands seeking the lip of the casket. His right hand caught hold of one of the handles, and closed thankfully around it. His arm was almost jerked from its socket as it took his body-weight, but he flung his other arm up and found the casket-edge. Using it as purchase, he hauled himself up like a half-drowned sailor. It was a strange lifeboat, but then this was a strange sea. Infinitely deep, infinitely terrible. Even as he laboured to secure himself a better hand- hold, the casket shook, and Harry looked up to discover that the dead man was sitting upright. Swann's eyes opened wide. He turned them on Harry; they were far from benign. The next moment the dead illusionist was scrambling to his feet – the floating casket rocking ever more violently with each movement. Once vertical, Swann proceeded to dislodge his guest by grinding his heel in Harry's knuckles. Harry looked up at Swann, begging for him to stop.

The Great Pretender was a sight to see. His eyes were starting from his sockets; his shirt was torn open to display the exit-wound in his chest. It was bleeding afresh. A rain of cold blood fell upon Harry's upturned face. And still the heel ground at his hands. Harry felt his grip slipping. Swann, sensing his approaching triumph, began to smile. "Fall, boy!" he said. "Fall!"

Harry could take no more. In a frenzied effort to save himself he let go of the handle in his right hand, and reached up to snatch at Swann's trouser-leg. His fingers found the hem, and he pulled. The smile vanished from the illusionist's face as he felt his balance go. He reached behind him to take hold of the casket lid for support, but the gesture only tipped the casket further over. The plush cushion tumbled past Harry's head; blossoms followed. Swann howled in his fury and delivered a vicious kick to Harry's hand. It was an error. The casket tipped over entirely and pitched the man out. Harry had time to glimpse Swann's appalled face as the illusionist fell past him. Then he too lost his grip and tumbled after him. The dark air whined past

his ears. Beneath him, the Gulfs spread their empty arms. And then, behind the rushing in his head, another sound: a human voice. "Is he dead?" it inquired. "No," another voice replied, “no, I don't think so.

What's his name, Dorothea?"

"D'Amour."

"Mr. D'Amour? Mr. D'Amour?"

Harry's descent slowed somewhat. Beneath him, the Gulfs roared their rage.

The voice came again, cultivated but unmelodious.

"Mr. D'Amour."

"Harry," said Dorothea.

At that word, from that voice, he stopped falling; felt himself borne up. He opened his eyes. He was lying on a solid floor, his head inches from the blank television screen. The flowers were all in place around the room, Swann in his casket, and God – if the rumours were to be believed – in his Heaven.

"I'm alive," he said.

He had quite an audience for his resurrection. Dorothea of course, and two strangers. One, the owner of the voice he'd first heard, stood close to the door. His features were unremarkable, except for his brows and lashes, which were pale to the point of invisibility. His female companion stood nearby. She shared with him this distressing banality, stripped bare of any feature that offered a clue to their natures.

"Help him up, angel," the man said, and the woman bent to comply. She was stronger than she looked, readily hauling Harry to his feet. He had vomited in his strange sleep. He felt dirty and ridiculous.

"What the hell happened?" he asked, as the woman escorted him to the chair. He sat down.

"He tried to poison you," the man said.

"Who did?"

"Valentin, of course."

"Valentin?"

"He's gone," Dorothea said. "Just disappeared." She was shaking. "I heard you call out, and came in here to find you on the floor. I thought you were going to choke."

"It's all right," said the man, “everything is in order now."

"Yes," said Dorothea, clearly reassured by his bland smile. "This is the lawyer I was telling you about, Harry. Mr. Butterfield."

Harry wiped his mouth. "Please to meet you," he said.

"Why don't we all go downstairs?" Butterfield said.

"And I can pay Mr. D'Amour what he's due."

"It's all right," Harry said, "I never take my fee until the job's done."

"But it is done," Butterfield said. "Your services are no longer required here."

Harry threw a glance at Dorothea. She was plucking a withered anthurium from an otherwise healthy spray. "I was contracted to stay with the body -”

"The arrangements for the disposal of Swann's body have been made," Butterfield returned. His courtesy was only just intact. "Isn't that right, Dorothea?"

"It's the middle of the night," Harry protested. "You won't get a cremation until tomorrow morning at the earliest." Thank you for your help," Dorothea said. "But I'm sure everything will be fine now that Mr. Butterfield has arrived. Just fine."

Butterfield turned to his companion.

"Why don't you go out and find a cab for Mr. D'Amour?" he said. Then, looking at Harry: "We don't want you walking the streets, do we?"

All the way downstairs, and in the hallway as Butterfield paid him off, Harry was willing Dorothea to contradict the lawyer and tell him she wanted Harry to stay. But she didn't even offer him a word of farewell as he was ushered out of the house. The two hundred dollars he'd been given were, of course, more than adequate recompense for the few hours of idleness he'd spent there, but he would happily have

burned all the bills for one sign that Dorothea gave a damn that they were parting. Quite clearly she did not. On past experience it would take his bruised ego a full twenty-four hours to recover from such indifference.

He got out of the cab on 3rd around 83rd Street, and walked through to a bar on Lexington where he knew he could put half a bottle of bourbon between himself and the dreams he'd had.

It was well after one. The street was deserted, except for him, and for the echo his footsteps had recently acquired. He turned the corner into Lexington, and waited. A few beats later, Valentin rounded the same corner. Harry took hold of him by his tie.

"Not a bad noose," he said, hauling the man off his heels.

Valentin made no attempt to free himself. "Thank God you're alive," he said.

"No thanks to you," Harry said. "What did you put in the drink?"

"Nothing," Valentin insisted. "Why should I?"

"So how come I found myself on the floor? How come the bad dreams?"

"Butterfield," Valentin said. "Whatever you dreamt, he brought with him, believe me. I panicked as soon as I heard him in the house, I admit it. I know I should have warned you, but I knew if I didn't get out quickly I wouldn't get out at all."

"Are you telling me he would have killed you?"

"Not personally; but yes." Harry looked incredulous.

"We go way back, him and me."

"He's welcome to you," Harry said, letting go of the tie. "I'm too damn tired to take any more of this shit." He turned from Valentin and began to walk away.

"Wait -" said the other man,"- I know I wasn't too sweet with you back at the house, but you've got to understand, things are going to get bad. For both of us."

"I thought you said it was all over bar the shouting?"

"I thought it was. I thought we had it all sewn up. Then Butterfield arrived and I realised how naive I was being. They're not going to let Swann rest in peace. Not now, not ever. We have to save him, D'Amour." Harry stopped walking and studied the man's face. To pass him in the street, he mused, you wouldn't have taken him for a lunatic.

"Did Butterfield go upstairs?" Valentin enquired.

"Yes he did. Why?"

"Do you remember if he approached the casket?"

Harry shook his head.

"Good," said Valentin. "Then the defences are holding, which gives us a little time. Swann was a fine tactician, you know. But he could be careless. That was how they caught him. Sheer carelessness. He knew they were coming for him. I told him outright, I said we should cancel the remaining performances and go home. At least he had some sanctuary there."

"You think he was murdered?"

"Jesus Christ," said Valentin, almost despairing of Harry, “of course he was murdered."

"So he's past saving, right? The man's dead."

"Dead; yes. Past saving? no."

"Do you talk gibberish to everyone?"

Valentin put his hand on Harry's shoulder, "Oh no," he said, with unfeigned sincerity. "I don't trust anyone the way I trust you."

"This is very sudden," said Harry. "May I ask why?"

"Because you're in this up to your neck, the way I am," Valentin replied.

"No I'm not," said Harry,,but Valentin ignored the denial, and went on with his talk. "At the moment we don't know how many of them there are, of course. They might simply have sent Butterfield, but I think that's unlikely." "Who's Butterfield with? The Mafia?"

"We should be so lucky," said Valentin. He reached in his pocket and

pulled out a piece of paper. "This is the woman Swann was with," he said, “the night at the theatre. It's possible she knows something of their strength." There was a witness?"

"She didn't come forward, but yes, there was. I was his procurer you see. I helped arrange his several adulteries, so that none ever embarrassed him. See if you can get to her -” He stopped abruptly. Somewhere close by, music was being played. It sounded like a drunken jazz band extemporising on bagpipes; a wheezing, rambling cacophony. Valentin's face instantly became a portrait of distress. "God help us…" he said softly, and began to back away from Harry.

"What's the problem?"

"Do you know how to pray?" Valentin asked him as he retreated down 83rd Street. The volume of the music was rising with every interval.

"I haven't prayed in twenty years," Harry replied.

"Then learn," came the response, and Valentin turned to run.

As he did so a ripple of darkness moved down the street from the north, dimming the luster of bar-signs and streetlamps as it came. Neon announcements suddenly guttered and died; there were protests out of upstairs windows as the lights failed and, as if encouraged by the curses, the music took on a fresh and yet more hectic rhythm. Above his head Harry heard a wailing sound, and looked up to see a ragged silhouette against the clouds which trailed tendrils like a man o' war as it descended upon the street, leaving the stench of rotting fish in its wake. Its target was clearly Valentin. He shouted above the wail and the music and the panic from the black-out, but no sooner had he yelled than he heard Valentin shout out from the darkness; a pleading cry that was rudely cut short.

He stood in the murk, his feet unwilling to carry him a step nearer the place from which the plea had come. The smell still stung his nostrils; nosing it, his nausea returned. And then, so did the lights; a wave of power igniting the lamps and the bar-signs as it washed back down the street. It reached Harry, and moved on to the spot where he had last seen Valentin. It was deserted; indeed the sidewalk was empty all the way down to the next intersection. The driveling jazz had stopped.

Eyes peeled for man, beast, or the remnants of either, Harry wandered down the sidewalk. Twenty yards from where he had been

standing the concrete was wet. Not with blood, he was pleased to see; the fluid was the colour of bile, and stank to high heaven. Amongst the splashes were several slivers of what might have been human tissue. Evidently Valentin had fought, and succeeded in opening a wound in his attacker. There were more traces of the blood further down the sidewalk, as if the injured thing had crawled some way before taking flight again. With Valentin, presumably. In the face of such strength Harry knew his meagre powers would have availed him not at all, but he felt guilty nevertheless. He'd heard the cry – seen the assailant swoop – and yet fear had sealed his soles to the ground.

He'd last felt fear the equal of this in Wyckoff Street, when Mimi Lomax's demon-lover had finally thrown off any pretence to humanity. The room had filled with the stink of ether and human dirt, and the demon had stood there in its appalling nakedness and shown him scenes that had turned his bowels to water. They were with him now, those scenes. They would be with him forever. He looked down at die scrap of paper Valentin had given him: the name and address had been rapidly scrawled, but they were just decipherable.

A wise man, Harry reminded himself, would screw this note up and throw it down into the gutter. But if the events in Wyckoff Street had taught him anything, it was that once touched by such malignancy as he had seen and dreamt in the last few hours, there could be no casual disposal of it. He had to follow it to its source, however repugnant that thought was, and make with it whatever bargains the strength of his hand allowed.

There was no good time to do business like this: the present would have to suffice. He walked back to Lexington and caught a cab to the address on the paper. He got no response from the bell marked Bernstein, but roused the doorman, and engaged in a frustrating debate with him through the glass door. The man was angry to have been raised at such an hour; Miss Bernstein was not in her apartment, he insisted, and remained untouched even when Harry intimated that there might be some life-or-death urgency in the matter. It was only when he produced his wallet that the fellow displayed the least flicker of concern. Finally, he let Harry in.

"She's not up there," he said, pocketing the bills. "She's not been in for days."

Harry took the elevator: his shins were aching, and his back too. He wanted sleep; bourbon, then sleep. There was no reply at the apartment as the doorman had predicted, but he kept knocking, and

calling her.

"Miss Bernstein? Are you there?"

There was no sign of life from within; not at least, until he said: "I want to talk about Swann."

He heard an intake of breath, close to the door.

"Is somebody there?" he asked. "Please answer. There's nothing to be afraid of."

After several seconds a slurred and melancholy voice murmured: "Swann's dead."

At least she wasn't, Harry thought. Whatever forces had snatched Valentin away, they had not yet reached this corner of Manhattan. "May I talk to you?" he requested.

"No," she replied. Her voice was a candle flame on the verge of extinction.

"Just a few questions, Barbara."

"I'm in the tiger's belly," the slow reply came, “and it doesn't want me to let you in."

Perhaps they had got here before him.

"Can't you reach the door?" he coaxed her. "It's not so far…"

"But it's eaten me," she said.

"Try, Barbara. The tiger won't mind. Reach."

There was silence from the other side of the door, then a shuffling sound. Was she doing as he had requested? It seemed so. He heard her fingers fumbling with the catch.

"That's it," he encouraged her. "Can you turn it? Try to turn it."

At the last instant he thought: suppose she's telling the truth, and there is a tiger in there with her? It was too late for retreat, the door was opening. There was no animal in the hallway. Just a woman, and the smell of dirt. She had clearly neither washed nor changed her clothes since fleeing from the theatre. The evening gown she wore was soiled and torn, her skin was grey with grime. He stepped into the

apartment. She moved down the hallway away from him, desperate to avoid his touch.

"It's all right," he said, “there's no tiger here."

Her wide eyes were almost empty; what presence roved there was lost to sanity.

"Oh there is," she said, I'm in the tiger. I'm in it forever."

As he had neither the time nor the skill required to dissuade her from this madness, he decided it was wiser to go with it.

"How did you get there?" he asked her. "Into the tiger? Was it when you were with Swann?"

She nodded.

"You remember that, do you?"

"Oh yes."

"What do you remember?"

"There was a sword; it fell. He was picking up -“ She stopped and frowned.

"Picking up what?"

She seemed suddenly more distracted than ever. "How can you hear me," she wondered, "when I'm in the tiger? Are you in the tiger too?

"Maybe I am," he said, not wanting to analyse the metaphor too closely.

"We're here forever, you know," she informed him. "We'll never be let out."

"Who told you that?"

She didn't reply, but cocked her head a little. "Can you hear?" she said.

"Hear?"

She took another step back down the hallway. Harry listened, but he could hear nothing. The growing agitation on Barbara's face was

sufficient to send him back to the front door and open it, however. The elevator was in operation. He could hear its soft hum across the landing. Worse: the lights in the hallway and on the stairs were deteriorating; the bulbs losing power with every foot the elevator ascended.

He turned back into the apartment and went to take hold of Barbara's wrist. She made no protest. Her eyes were fixed on the doorway through which she seemed to know her judgement would come.

"We'll take the stairs," he told her, and led her out on to the landing. The lights were within an ace of failing. He glanced up at the floor numbers being ticked off above the elevator doors. Was this the top floor they were on, or one shy of it? He couldn't remember, and there was no time to think before the lights went out entirely. He stumbled across the unfamiliar territory of the landing with the girl in tow, hoping to God he'd find the stairs before the elevator reached this floor. Barbara wanted to loiter, but he bullied her to pick up her pace. As his foot found the top stair the elevator finished its ascent.

The doors hissed open, and a cold fluorescence washed the landing. He couldn't see its source, nor did he wish to, but its effect was to reveal to the naked eye every stain and blemish, every sign of decay and creeping rot that the paintwork sought to camouflage. The show stole Harry's attention for a moment only, then he took a firmer hold of the woman's hand and they began their descent. Barbara was not interested in escape however, but in events on the landing. Thus occupied she tripped and fell heavily against Harry. The two would have toppled but that he caught hold of the banister. Angered, he turned to her. They were out of sight of the landing, but the light crept down the stairs and washed over Barbara's face. Beneath its uncharitable scrutiny Harry saw decay busy in her. Saw rot in her teeth, and the death in her skin and hair and nails. No doubt he would have appeared much the same to her, were she to have looked, but she was still staring back over her shoulder and up the stairs. The light-source was on the move. Voices accompanied it.

"The door's open," a woman said.

"What are you waiting for?" a voice replied. It was Butterfield.

Harry held both breath and wrist as the light- source moved again, towards the door presumably, and then was partially eclipsed as it disappeared into the apartment.

"We have to be quick," he told Barbara. She went with him down three or four steps and then, without warning, her hand leapt for his face, nails opening his cheek. He let go of her hand to protect himself, and in that instant she was away – back up the stairs.

He cursed and stumbled in pursuit of her, but her former sluggishness had lifted; she was startlingly nimble. By the dregs of light from the landing he watched her reach the top of the stairs and disappear from sight. "Here I am," she called out as she went.

He stood immobile on the stairway, unable to decide whether to go or stay, and so unable to move at all. Ever since Wyckoff Street he'd hated stairs. Momentarily the light from above flared up, throwing the shadows of the banisters across him; then it died again. He put his hand to his face. She had raised weals, but there was little blood. What could he hope from her if he went to her aid? Only more of the same. She was a lost cause.

Even as he despaired of her he heard a sound from round the corner at the head of the stairs; a soft sound that might have been either a footstep or a sigh. Had she escaped their influence after all? Or perhaps not even reached the apartment door, but thought better of it and about-turned? Even as he was weighing up the odds he heard her say: "Help me…" The voice was a ghost of a ghost; but it was indisputably her, and she was in terror. He reached for his.38, and started up the stairs again. Even before he had turned the corner he felt the nape of his neck itch as his hackles rose.

She was there. But so was the tiger. It stood on the landing, mere feet from Harry, its body humming with latent power. Its eyes were molten; its open maw impossibly large. And there, already in its vast throat, was Barbara. He met her eyes out of the tiger's mouth, and saw a flicker of comprehension in them that was worse than any madness. Then the beast threw its head back and forth to settle its prey in its gut. She had been swallowed whole, apparently. There was no blood on the landing, nor about the tiger's muzzle; only the appalling sight of the girl's face disappearing down the tunnel of the animal's throat.

She loosed a final cry from the belly of the thing, and as it rose it seemed to Harry that the beast attempted a grin. Its face crinkled up grotesquely, the eyes narrowing like those of a laughing Buddha, the lips peeling back to expose a sickle of brilliant teeth. Behind this display the cry was finally hushed. In that instant the tiger leapt. Harry fired into its devouring bulk and as the shot met its flesh the leer and the maw and the whole striped mass of it unwove in a single

beat. Suddenly it was gone, and there was only a drizzle of pastel confetti spiraling down around him. The shot had aroused interest. There were raised voices in one or two of the apartments, and the light that had accompanied Butterfield from the elevator was brightening through the open door of the Bernstein residence. He was almost tempted to stay and see the light-bringer, but discretion bettered his curiosity, and he turned and made his descent, taking the stairs two and three at a time. The confetti tumbled after him, as if it had a life of its own. Barbara's life, perhaps; transformed into paper pieces and tossed away.

He reached the lobby breathless. The doorman was standing there, staring up the stairs vacantly. "Somebody get shot?" he enquired.

"No," said Harry, “eaten."

As he headed for the door he heard the elevator start to hum as it descended. Perhaps merely a tenant, coming down for a pre-dawn stroll. Perhaps not.

He left the doorman as he had found him, sullen and confused, and made his escape into the street, putting two block lengths between him and the apartment building before he stopped running. They did not bother to come after him. He was beneath their concern, most likely.

So what was he to do now? Valentin was dead, Barbara Bernstein too. He was none the wiser now than he'd been at the outset, except that he'd learned again the lesson he'd been taught in Wyckoff Street: that when dealing with the Gulfs it was wiser never to believe your eyes. The moment you trusted your senses, the moment you believed a tiger to be a tiger, you were half theirs. Not a complicated lesson, but it seemed he had forgotten it, like a fool, and it had taken two deaths to teach it to him afresh. Maybe it would be simpler to have the rule tattooed on the back of his hand, so that he couldn't check the time without being reminded: Never believe your eyes.

The principle was still fresh in his mind as he walked back towards his apartment and a man stepped out of the doorway and said: "Harry."

It looked like Valentin; a wounded Valentin, a Valentin who'd been dismembered and sewn together again by a committee of blind surgeons, but the same man in essence. But then the tiger had looked like a tiger, hadn't it? "It's me," he said.

"Oh no," Harry said. "Not this time."

"What are you talking about? It's Valentin."

"So prove it."

The other man looked puzzled. "This is no time for games," he said, “we're in desperate straits." Harry took his.38 from his pocket and pointed at Valentin's chest. "Prove it or I shoot you," he said. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I saw you torn apart."

"Not quite," said Valentin. His left arm was swathed in makeshift bandaging from fingertip to mid-bicep. "It was touch and go…"he said,"… but everything has its Achilles' heel. It's just a question of finding the right spot." Harry peered at the man. He wanted to believe that this was indeed Valentin, but it was too incredible to believe that the frail form in front of him could have survived the monstrosity he'd seen on 83rd Street. No; this was another illusion. Like the tiger: paper and malice.

The man broke Harry's train of thought. "Your steak…"he said.

"My steak?"

"You like it almost burned," Valentin said. "I pro- tested, remember?"

Harry remembered. "Go on," he said.

"And you said you hated the sight of blood. Even, if it wasn't your own."

"Yes," said Harry. His doubts were lifting. "That's right."

"You asked me to prove I'm Valentin. That's the best I can do." Harry was almost persuaded. "In God's name," Valentin said, “do we have to debate this standing on the street?"

"You'd better come in."

The apartment was small, but tonight it felt more stifling than ever. Valentin sat himself down with a good view of the door. He refused spirits or first-aid. Harry helped himself to bourbon. He was on his third shot when Valentin finally said: "We have to go back to the house, Harry."

"What?"

"We have to claim Swann's body before Butterfield."

"I did my best already. It's not my business any more."

"So you leave Swann to the Pit?" Valentin said.

"She doesn't care, why should I?"

"You mean Dorothea? She doesn't know what Swann was involved with. That's why she's so trusting. She has suspicions maybe, but, insofar as it is possible to be guiltless in all of this, she is." He paused to adjust the position of his injured arm. "She was a prostitute, you know. I don't suppose she told you that. Swann once said to me he married her because only prostitutes know the value of love."

Harry let this apparent paradox go.

"Why did she stay with him?" he asked. "He wasn't exactly faithful, was he?"

"She loved him," Valentin replied. "It's not unheard of."

"And you?"

"Oh I loved him too, in spite of his stupidities. That's why we have to help him. If Butterfield and his associates get their hands on Swann's mortal remains, there'll be all Hell to pay."

"I know. I got a glimpse at the Bernstein place." "What did you see?"

"Something and nothing," said Harry. "A tiger, I thought; only it wasn't."

"The old paraphernalia," Valentin commented.

"And there was something else with Butterfield. Some- thing that shed light: I didn't see what." "The Castrate," Valentin muttered to himself, clearly discomfited. "We'll have to be careful."

He stood up, the movement causing him to wince. "I think we should be on our way, Harry."

"Are you paying me for this?" Harry inquired, “or am I doing it all for love?"

"You're doing it because of what happened at Wyckoff Street," came the softly-spoken reply. "Because you lost poor Mimi Lomax to the Gulfs, and you don't want to lose Swann. That is, if you've not already done so."

They caught a cab on Madison Avenue and headed back uptown to 61st Street, keeping their silence as they rode. Harry had half a hundred questions to ask of Valentin. Who was Butterfield, for one, and what was Swann's crime was that he be pursued to death and beyond? So many puzzles. But Valentin looked sick and unfit for plying with questions. Besides, Harry sensed that the more he knew the less enthusiastic he would be about the journey they were now taking.

"We have perhaps one advantage -" Valentin said as they approached 61st Street. "They can't be expecting this frontal attack. Butterfield presumes I'm dead, and probably thinks you're hiding your head in mortal terror." "I'm working on it."

"You're not in danger," Valentin replied, "at least not the way Swann is. If they were to take you apart limb by limb it would be nothing beside the torments they have waiting for the magician."

"Illusionist," Harry corrected him, but Valentin shook his head.

"Magician he was; magician he will always be."

The driver interrupted before Harry could quote Dorothea on the subject.

"What number you people want?" he said.

"Just drop us here on the right," Valentin instructed him. "And wait for us, understand?"

"Sure."

Valentin turned to Harry. "Give the man fifty dollars."

"Fifty?

"Do you want him to wait or not?"

Harry counted four tens and ten singles into the driver's hand.

"You'd better keep the engine running," he said.

"Anything to oblige," the driver grinned.

Harry joined Valentin on the sidewalk and they walked the twenty-five yards to the house. The street was still noisy, despite the hour: the party that Harry had seen in preparation half a night ago was at its height. There was no sign of life at the Swann residence however.

Perhaps they don't expect us, Harry thought. Certainly this head-on assault was about the most foolhardy tactic imaginable, and as such might catch the enemy off- guard. But were such forces ever off-guard? Was there ever a minute in their maggoty lives when their eyelids drooped and sleep tamed them for a space? No. In Harry's experience it was only the good who needed sleep; iniquity and its practitioners were awake every eager moment, planning fresh felonies.

"How do we get in?" he asked as they stood outside the house.

"I have the key," Valentin replied, and went to the door.

There was no retreat now. The key was turned, the door was open, and they were stepping out of the comparative safety of the street. The house was as dark within as it had appeared from without. There was no sound of human presence on any of the floors. Was it possible that the defences Swann had laid around his corpse had indeed rebuffed Butterfield, and that he and his cohorts had retreated? Valentin quashed such misplaced optimism almost immediately, taking hold of Harry's arm and leaning close to whisper: "They're here." This was not the time to ask Valentin how he knew, but Harry made a mental note to enquire when, or rather if, they got out of the house with their tongues still in their heads.

Valentin was already on the stairs. Harry, his eyes still accustoming themselves to the vestigial light that crept in from the street, crossed the hallway after him. The other man moved confidently in the gloom, and Harry was glad of it. Without Valentin plucking at his sleeve, and guiding him around the half-landing he might well have crippled himself.

Despite what Valentin had said, there was no more sound or sight of occupancy up here than there had been below, but as they advanced towards the master bedroom where Swann lay, a rotten tooth in Harry's lower jaw that had lately been quiescent began to throb afresh, and his bowels ached to break wind. The anticipation was crucifying. He felt a barely suppressible urge to yell out, and to oblige the enemy to show its hand, if indeed it had hands to show. Valentin

had reached the door. He turned his head in Harry's direction, and even in the murk it was apparent that fear was taking its toll on him too. His skin glistened; he stank of fresh sweat.

He pointed towards the door. Harry nodded. He was as ready as he was ever going to be. Valentin reached for the door handle. The sound of the lock-mechanism seemed deafeningly loud, but it brought no response from anywhere in the house. The door swung open, and the heady scent of flowers met them. They had begun to decay in the forced heat of the house; there was a rankness beneath the perfume. More welcome than the scent was the light. The curtains in the room had not been entirely drawn, and the street-lamps described the interior: the flowers massed like clouds around the casket; the chair where Harry had sat, the Calvados bottle beside it; the mirror above the fireplace showing the room its secret self.

Valentin was already moving across to the casket, and Harry heard him sigh as he set eyes on his old master. He wasted little time, but immediately set to lifting the lower half of the casket lid. It defeated his single arm however and Harry went to his assistance, eager to get the job done and be away. Touching the solid wood of the casket brought his nightmare back with breath-snatching force: the Pit opening beneath him, the illusionist rising from his bed like a sleeper unwillingly woken. There was no such spectacle now, however. Indeed a little life in the corpse might have made the job easier. Swann was a big man, and his limp body was uncooperative to a fault. The simple act of lifting him from his casket took all their breath and attention. He came at last, though reluctantly, his long limbs flopping about.

"Now…" said Valentin '… downstairs."

As they moved to the door something in the street ignited, or so it seemed, for the interior suddenly brightened. The light was not kind to their burden. It revealed the crudity of the cosmetics applied to Swann's face, and the burgeoning putrescence beneath. Harry had an instant only to appreciate these felicities, and then the light brightened again, and he realised that it wasn't outside, but in.

He looked up at Valentin, and almost despaired. The luminescence was even less charitable to servant than to master; it seemed to strip the flesh from Valentin's face. Harry caught only a glimpse of what it revealed beneath events stole his attention an instant later – but he saw enough to know that had Valentin not been his accomplice in this venture he might well have run from him.

"Get him out of here!" Valentin yelled.

He let go of Swann's legs, leaving Harry to steer Swann single-handed. The corpse proved recalcitrant however. Harry had only made two cursing steps towards the exit when things took a turn for the cataclysmic. He heard Valentin unloose an oath, and looked up to see that the mirror had given up all pretence to reflection, and that something was moving up from its liquid depths, bringing the light with it.

"What is it?" Harry breathed.

"The Castrate," came the reply. "Will you go?"

There was no time to obey Valentin's panicked instruction however, before the hidden thing broke the plane of the mirror and invaded the room. Harry had been wrong. It did not carry the light with it as it came: it was the light. Or rather, some holocaust blazed in its bowels, the glare of which escaped through the creature's body by whatever route it could. It had once been human; a mountain of a man with the belly and the breasts of a neolithic Venus. But the fire in its body had twisted it out of true, breaking out through its palms and its navel, burning its mouth and nostrils into one ragged hole. It had, as its name implied, been unsexed; from that hole too, light spilled. By it, the decay of the flowers speeded into seconds. The blossoms withered and died. The room was filled in moments with the stench of rotting vegetable matter.

Harry heard Valentin call his name, once, and again. Only then did he remember the body in his arms. He dragged his eyes from the hovering Castrato, and carried Swann another yard. The door was at his back, and open. He dragged his burden out into the landing as the Castrato kicked over the casket. He heard the din, and then shouts from Valentin. There followed another terrible commotion, and the high-pitched voice of the Castrate, talking through that hole in its face.

"Die and be happy," it said, and a hail of furniture was flung against the wall with such force chairs embedded themselves in the plaster. Valentin had escaped the assault however, or so it seemed, for an instant later Harry heard the Castrato shriek. It was an appalling sound: pitiful and revolting. He would have stopped his ears, but he had his hands full.

He had almost reached the top of the stairs. Dragging Swann a few

steps further he laid the body down. The Castrate's light was not dimmed, despite its complaints; it still flickered on the bedroom wall like a midsummer thunderstorm. For the third time tonight – once on 83rd Street, and again on the stairs of the Bernstein place – Harry hesitated. If he went back to help Valentin perhaps there would be worse sights to see than ever Wyckoff Street had offered. But there could be no retreat this time. Without Valentin he was lost. He raced back down the landing and flung open the door. The air was thick; the lamps rocking. In the middle of the room hung the Castrato, still defying gravity. It had hold of Valentin by his hair. Its other hand was poised, first and middle fingers spread like twin horns, about to stab out its captive's eyes.

Harry pulled his.38 from his pocket, aimed, and fired. He had always been a bad shot when given more than a moment to take aim, but in extremis, when instinct governed rational thought, he was not half bad. This was such an occasion. The bullet found the Castrate's neck, and opened another wound. More in surprise than pain perhaps, it let Valentin go. There was a leakage of light from the hole in its neck, and it put its hand to the place. Valentin was quickly on his feet.

"Again," he called to Harry. "Fire again!"

Harry obeyed the instruction. His second bullet pierced the creature's chest, his third its belly. This last wound seemed particularly traumatic; the distended flesh, ripe for bursting, broke – and the trickle of light that spilled from the wound rapidly became a flood as the abdomen split.

Again the Castrate howled, this time in panic, and lost all control of its flight. It reeled like a pricked balloon towards the ceiling, its fat hands desperately attempting to stem the mutiny in its substance. But it had reached critical mass; there was no making good the damage done. Lumps of its flesh began to break from it. Valentin, either too stunned or too fascinated, stood staring up at the disintegration while rains of cooked meat fell around him. Harry took hold of him and hauled him back towards the door.

The Castrate was finally earning its name, unloosing a desolate ear-piercing note. Harry didn't wait to watch its demise, but slammed the bedroom door as the voice reached an awesome pitch, and the windows smashed. Valentin was grinning.

"Do you know what we did?" he said.

"Never mind. Let's just get the fuck out of here."

The sight of Swann's corpse at the top of the stairs seemed to chasten Valentin. Harry instructed him to assist, and he did so as efficiently as his dazed condition allowed. Together they began to escort the illusionist down the stairs. As they reached the front door there was a final shriek from above, as the Castrate came apart at the seams. Then silence.

The commotion had not gone unnoticed. Revelers had appeared from the house opposite, a crowd of late-night pedestrians had assembled on the sidewalk.

"Some party," one of them said as the trio emerged. Harry had half expected the cab to have deserted them, but he had reckoned without the driver's curiosity. The man was out of his vehicle and staring up at the first floor window. "Does he need a hospital?" he asked as they bundled Swann into the back of the cab.

"No," Harry returned. "He's about as good as he's going to get."

"Will you drive?" said Valentin.

"Sure. Just tell me where to."

"Anywhere," came the weary reply. "Just get out of here."'

"Hold it a minute," the driver said, "I don't want any trouble."

"Then you'd better move," said Valentin. The driver met his passenger's gaze. Whatever he saw there, his next words were: "I'm driving," and they took off along East 6st like the proverbial bat out of hell.

"We did it, Harry," Valentin said when they'd been travelling for a few minutes. "We got him back." "And that thing? Tell me about it."

"The Castrato? What's to tell? Butterfield must have left it as a watchdog, until he could bring in a technician to decode Swann's defence mechanisms. We were lucky. It was in need of milking. That makes them unstable." "How do you know so much about all of this?"

"It's a long story," said Valentin. "And not for a cab ride."

"So what now? We can't drive round in circles all night."

Valentin looked across at the body that sat between them, prey to

every whim of the cab's suspension and road menders' craft. Gently, he put Swann's hands on his lap.

"You're right of course," he said. "We have to make arrangements for the cremation, as swiftly as possible." The cab bounced across a pot-hole. Valentin's face tightened.

"Are you in pain?" Harry asked him.

"I've been in worse."

"We could go back to my apartment, and rest there."

Valentin shook his head. "Not very clever," he said, “it's the first place they'll look."

"My offices, then -”

"The second place."

"Well, Jesus, this cab's going to run out of gas eventually."

At this point the driver intervened.

"Say, did you people mention cremation?"

"Maybe," Valentin replied.

"Only my brother-in-law's got a funeral business out in Queens."

"Is that so?" said Harry.

"Very reasonable rates. I can recommend him. No shit."

"Could you contact him now? Valentin said.

"It's two in the morning."

"We're in a hurry."

The driver reached up and adjusted his mirror; he was looking at Swann.

"You don't mind me asking, do you?" he said. "But is that a body you got back there?"

"It is," said Harry. "And he's getting impatient."

The driver made a whooping sound. "Shit!" he said. "I've had a woman drop twins in that seat; I've had whores do business; I even had an alligator back there one time. But this beats them all!" He pondered for a moment, then said: "You kill him, did you?"

"No," said Harry.

"Guess we'd be heading for the East River if you had, eh?"

"That's right. We just want a decent cremation. And quickly."

That's understandable."

"What's your name?" Harry asked him.

"Winston Jowitt. But everybody calls me Byron. I'm a poet, see? Leastways, I am at weekends." "Byron."

"See, any other driver would be freaked out, right? Finding two guys with a body in the back seat. But the way I see it, it's all material."

"For the poems."

"Right," said Byron. "The Muse is a fickle mistress. You have to take it where you find it, you know? Speaking of which, you gentlemen got any idea where you want to go?"

"Make it your offices," Valentin told Harry. "And he can call his brother-in-law."

"Good," said Harry. Then, to Byron: "Head west along 45th Street to 8th."

"You got it," said Byron, and the cab's speed doubled in the space of twenty yards. "Say," he said, “you fellows fancy a poem?"

"Now?" said Harry.

"I like to improvise," Byron replied. "Pick a subject. Any subject."

Valentin hugged his wounded arm close. Quietly, he said: "How about the end of the world?" "Good subject," the poet replied, “just give me a minute or two."

"So soon?" said Valentin.

They took a circuitous route to the offices, while Byron Jowitt tried a selection of rhymes for Apocalypse. The sleepwalkers were out on 45th Street, in search of one high or another; some sat in the doorways, one lay sprawled across the sidewalk. None of them gave the cab or its occupants more than the briefest perusal. Harry unlocked the front door and he and Byron carried Swann up to the third floor.

The office was home from home: cramped and chaotic. They put Swann in the swivel chair behind the furred coffee cups and the alimony demands heaped on the desk. He looked easily the healthiest of the quartet. Byron was sweating like a bull after the climb; Harry felt – and surely looked – as though he hadn't slept in sixty days; Valentin sat slumped in the clients' chair, so drained of vitality he might have been at death's door.

"You look terrible," Harry told him.

"No matter," he said. "It'll all be done soon."

Harry turned to Byron. "How about calling this brother-in-law of yours?"

While Byron set to doing so, Harry returned his attention to Valentin.

"I've got a first-aid box somewhere about," he said. "Shall I bandage up that arm?"

"Thank you, but no. Like you, I hate the sight of blood. Especially my own."

Byron was on the phone, chastising his brother-in- law for his ingratitude. "What's your beef? I got you a client! I know the time, for Christ's sake, but business is business…"

"Tell him we'll pay double his normal rate," Valentin said.

"You hear that, Mel? Twice your usual fee. So get over here, will you?" He gave the address to his brother-in- law, and put down the receiver. "He's coming over," he announced.

"Now?" said Harry.

"Now," Byron glanced at his watch. "My belly thinks my throat's cut. How about we eat? You got an all night place near here?"

"There's one a block down from here."

"You want food?" Byron asked Valentin.

"I don't think so," he said. He was looking worse by the moment.

"OK," Byron said to Harry, “just you and me then. You got ten I could borrow?"

Harry gave him a bill, the keys to the street door and an order for doughnuts and coffee, and Byron went on his way. Only when he'd gone did Harry wish he'd convinced the poet to stave off his hunger pangs a while. The office was distressingly quiet without him: Swann in residence behind the desk, Valentin succumbing to sleep in the other chair. The hush brought to mind another such silence, during that last, awesome night at the Lomax house when Mimi's demon-lover, wounded by Father Hesse, had slipped away into the walls for a while, and left them waiting and waiting, knowing it would come back but not certain of when or how. Six hours they'd sat – Mimi occasionally breaking the silence with laughter or gibberish – and the first Harry had known of its return was the smell of cooking excrement, and Mimi's cry of "Sodomite!" as Hesse surrendered to an act his faith had too long forbidden him. There had been no more silence then, not for a long space: only Hesse's cries, and Harry's pleas for forgetfulness. They had all gone unanswered.

It seemed he could hear the demon's voice now; its demands, its invitations. But no; it was only Valentin. The man was tossing his head back and forth in sleep, his face knotted up. Suddenly he started from his chair, one word on his lips: "Swann'

His eyes opened, and as they alighted on the illusionist's body, which was propped in the chair opposite, tears came uncontrollably, wracking him. "He's dead," he said, as though in his dream he had forgotten that bitter fact. "I failed him, D'Amour. That's why he's dead. Because of my negligence."

"You're doing your best for him now," Harry said, though he knew the words were poor compensation. "Nobody could ask for a better friend."

"I was never his friend," Valentin said, staring at the corpse with brimming eyes. "I always hoped he'd one day trust me entirely. But he never did."

"Why not?"

"He couldn't afford to trust anybody. Not in his situation." He wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand. "Maybe," Harry said, “it's about time you told me what all this is about."

"If you want to hear."

"I want to hear."

"Very well," said Valentin. "Thirty-two years ago, Swann made a bargain with the Gulfs. He agreed to be an ambassador for them if they, in return, gave him magic."

"Magic'

"The ability to perform miracles. To transform matter. T o bewitch souls. Even to drive out God." "That's a miracle?"

"It's more difficult than you think," Valentin replied.

"So Swann was a genuine magician?"

"Indeed he was."

"Then why didn't he use his powers?"

"He did," Valentin replied. "He used them every night, at every performance."

Harry was baffled. "I don't follow."

"Nothing the Prince of Lies offers to humankind is of the least value," Valentin said, “or it wouldn't be offered. Swann didn't know that when he first made his Covenant. But he soon learned. Miracles are useless. Magic is a distraction from the real concerns. It's rhetoric. Melodrama."

"So what exactly are the real concerns?"

"You should know better than I," Valentin replied.

"Fellowship, maybe? Curiosity? Certainly it matters not in the least if water can be made into wine, or Lazarus to live another year."

Harry saw the wisdom of this, but not how it had brought the magician to Broadway. As it was, he didn't need to ask. Valentin had taken up the story afresh. His tears had cleared with the telling; some trace of animation had crept back into his features.

"It didn't take Swann long to realise he'd sold his soul for a mess of pottage," he explained. "And when he did he was inconsolable. At least he was for a while. Then he began to contrive a revenge."

"How?"

"By taking Hell's name in vain. By using the magic which it boasted of as a trivial entertainment, degrading the power of the Gulfs by passing off their wonder- working as mere illusion. It was, you see, an act of heroic perversity. Every time a trick of Swann's was explained away as sleight-of-hand, the Gulfs squirmed." "Why didn't they kill him?" Harry said.

"Oh, they tried. Many times. But he had allies. Agents in their camp who warned him of their plots against him. He escaped their retribution for years that way."

"Until now?"

"Until now," Valentin sighed. "He was careless, and so was I. Now he's dead, and the Gulfs are itching for him." "I see."

"But we were not entirely unprepared for this eventuality. He had made his apologies to Heaven; and I dare to hope he's been forgiven his trespasses. Pray that he has. There's more than his salvation at stake tonight." "Yours too?"

"All of us who loved him are tainted," Valentin replied, “but if we can destroy his physical remains before the Gulfs claim them we may yet avoid the consequences of his Covenant."

"Why did you wait so long? Why didn't you just cremate him die day he died?"

Their lawyers are not fools. The Covenant specifically proscribes a period of lying-in-state. If we had attempted to ignore that clause his soul would have been forfeited automatically."

"So when is this period up?"

"Three hours ago, at midnight," Valentin replied. "That's why they're so desperate, you see. And so dangerous."

Another poem came to Byron Jowitt as he ambled back up 8th. Avenue, working his way through a tuna salad sandwich. His Muse was not to be rushed. Poems could take as long as five minutes to be

finalised; longer if they involved a double rhyme. He didn't hurry on his journey back to the offices therefore, but wandered in a dreamy sort of mood, turning the lines every which way to make them fit. That way he hoped to arrive back with another finished poem. Two in one night was damn good going. He had not perfected the final couplet however, by the time he reached the door. Operating on automatic pilot he fumbled in his pocket for the keys D'Amour had loaned him, and let himself in. He was about to close the door again when a woman stepped through the gap, smiling at him. She was a beauty, and Byron, being a poet, was a fool for beauty.

"Please," she said to him, "I need your help."

"What can I do for you?" said Byron through a mouthful of food.

"Do you know a man by the name of D'Amour? Harry D'Amour?"

"Indeed I do. I'm going up to his place right now."

"Perhaps you could show me the way?" the woman asked him, as Byron closed the door.

"Be my pleasure," he replied, and led her across the lobby to the bottom of the stairs.

"You know, you're very sweet," she told him; and Byron melted.

Valentin stood at the window.

"Something wrong?" Harry asked.

"Just a feeling," Valentin commented. "I have a suspicion maybe the Devil's in Manhattan."

"So what's new?"

"That maybe he's coming for us." As if on cue there was a knock at the door. Harry jumped.

"It's all right," Valentin said, “he never knocks."

Harry went to the door, feeling like a fool.

"Is that you, Byron?" he asked before unlocking it.

"Please," said a voice he thought he'd never hear again.

"Help me…"

He opened the door. It was Dorothea, of course. She was colourless as water, and as unpredictable. Even before Harry had invited her across the office threshold a dozen expressions, or hints of such, had crossed her face: anguish, suspicion, terror. And now, as her eyes alighted upon the body of her beloved Swann, relief and gratitude. "You do have him," she said, stepping into the office. Harry closed the door. There was a chill from up the stairs. Thank God. Thank God." She took Harry's face in her hands and kissed him lightly on the lips. Only then did she notice Valentin.

She dropped her hands.

"What's he doing here?" she asked.

"He's with me. With us."

She looked doubtful. "No," she said.

"We can trust him."

"I said no! Get him out, Harry." There was a cold fury in her; she shook with it. "Get him out!" Valentin stared at her, glassy-eyed. "The lady doth protest too much," he murmured.

Dorothea put her fingers to her lips as if to stifle any further outburst. "I'm sorry," she said, turning back to Harry, “but you must be told what this man is capable of-”

"Without him your husband would still be at the house, Mrs Swann," Harry pointed out. "He's the one you should be grateful to, not me."

At this, Dorothea's expression softened, through bafflement to a new gentility.

"Oh?" she said. Now she looked back at Valentin. "I'm sorry. When you ran from the house I assumed some complicity…"

"With whom?" Valentin inquired.

She made a tiny shake of her head; then said, "Your arm. Are you hurt?"

"A minor injury," he returned.

"I've already tried to get it rebandaged," Harry said. "But the

bastard's too stubborn."

"Stubborn I am," Valentin replied, without inflection.

"But we'll be finished here soon -" said Harry.

Valentin broke in. "Don't tell her anything," he snapped.

"I'm just going to explain about the brother-in-law -" Harry said.

The brother-in-law?" Dorothea said, sitting down. The sigh of her legs crossing was the most enchanting sound Harry had heard in twenty-four hours. "Oh please tell me about the brother-in-law…"

Before Harry could open his mouth to speak, Valentin said: "It's not her, Harry."

The words, spoken without a trace of drama, took a few seconds to make sense. Even when they did, their lunacy was self-evident. Here she was in the flesh, perfect in every detail.

"What are you talking about?" Harry said.

"How much more plainly can I say it?" Valentin replied. "It's not her. It's a trick. An illusion. They know where we are, and they sent this up to spy out our defences." Harry would have laughed, but that these accusations were bringing tears to Dorothea's eyes.

"Stop it," he told Valentin.

"No, Harry. You think for a moment. All the traps they've laid, all the beasts they've mustered. You suppose she could have escaped that?" He moved away from the window towards Dorothea. "Where's Butterfield?" he spat. "Down the hall, waiting for your signal?"

"Shut up," said Harry.

"He's scared to come up here himself, isn't he?" Valentin went on. "Scared of Swann, scared of us, probably, after what we did to his gelding."

Dorothea looked at Harry. "Make him stop," she said. Harry halted Valentin's advance with a hand on his bony chest.

"You heard the lady," he said.

"That's no lady," Valentin replied, his eyes blazing. "I don't know

what it is, but it's no lady."

Dorothea stood up. "I came here because I hoped I'd be safe," she said.

"You are safe," Harry said.

"Not with him around, I'm not," she replied, looking back at Valentin. "I think I'd be wiser going." Harry touched her arm.

"No," he told her.

"Mr… D'Amour," she said sweetly, “you've already earned your fee ten times over. Now I think it's time I took responsibility for my husband."

Harry scanned that mercurial face. There wasn't a trace of deception in it.

"I have a car downstairs," she said. "I wonder… could you carry him downstairs for me?"

Harry heard a noise like a cornered dog behind him and turned to see Valentin standing beside Swann's corpse. He had picked up the heavy-duty cigarette lighter from the desk, and was flicking it. Sparks came, but no flame. "What the hell are you doing?" Harry demanded.

Valentin didn't look at the speaker, but at Dorothea. "She knows," he said.

He had got the knack of the lighter; the flame flared up.

Dorothea made a small, desperate sound.

"Please don't," she said.

"We'll all burn with him if necessary," Valentin said.

"He's insane," Dorothea's tears had suddenly gone.

"She's right," Harry told Valentin, "you're acting like a madman."

"And you're a fool to fall for a few tears!" came the reply. "Can't you see that if she takes him we've lost everything we've fought for?"

"Don't listen," she murmured. "You know me, Harry. You trust me."

"What's under that face of yours?" Valentin said. "What are you? A Coprolite? Homunculus?" The names meant nothing to Harry. All he knew was the proximity of the woman at her side; her hand laid upon his arm.

"And what about you?" she said to Valentin. Then, more softly, "why don't you show us your wound?" She forsook the shelter of Harry's side, and crossed to the desk. The lighter flame guttered at her approach. "Go on…" she said, her voice no louder than a breath."… I dare you."

She glanced round at Harry. "Ask him, D'Amour," she said. "Ask him to show you what he's got hidden under the bandages."

"What's she talking about?" Harry asked. The glimmer of trepidation in Valentin's eyes was enough to convince Harry there was merit in Dorothea's request. "Explain," he said.

Valentin didn't get the chance however. Distracted by Harry's demand he was easy prey when Dorothea reached across the desk and knocked the lighter from his hand. He bent to retrieve it, but she seized on the ad hoc bundle of bandaging and pulled. It tore, and fell away. She stepped back. "See?" she said.

Valentin stood revealed. The creature on 83rd Street had torn the sham of humanity from his arm; the limb beneath was a mass of blue-black scales. Each digit of the blistered hand ended in a nail that opened and closed like a parrot's beak. He made no attempt to conceal the truth. Shame eclipsed every other response.

"I warned you," she said, "I warned you he wasn't to be trusted."

Valentin stared at Harry. "I have no excuses," he said. "I only ask you to believe that I want what's best for Swann." "How can you?" Dorothea said. "You're a demon."

"More than that," Valentin replied, "I'm Swann's Tempter. His familiar; his creature. But I belong to him more than I ever belonged to the Gulfs. And I will defy them -" he looked at Dorothea,"- and their agents." She turned to Harry. "You have a gun," she said. "Shoot the filth. You mustn't suffer a thing like that to live." Harry looked at the pustulent arm; at the clacking fingernails: what further repugnance was there in wait behind the flesh facade?

"Shoot it," the woman said.

He took his gun from his pocket. Valentin seemed to have shrunk in the moments since the revelation of his true nature. Now he leaned against the wall, his face slimy with despair.

"Kill me then," he said to Harry, "kill me if I revolt you so much. But Harry, I beg you, don't give Swann to her. Promise me that. Wait for the driver to come back, and dispose of the body by whatever means you can. Just don't give it to her!"

"Don't listen," Dorothea said. "He doesn't care about Swann the way I do."

Harry raised the gun. Even looking straight at death, Valentin did not flinch.

"You've failed, Judas," she said to Valentin. "The magician's mine."

"What magician?" said Harry.

"Why Swann, of course!" she replied lightly. "How many magicians have you got up here?"

Harry dropped his bead on Valentin.

"He's an illusionist," he said, “you told me that at the very beginning. Never call him a magician, you said." "Don't be pedantic," she replied, trying to laugh off her faux pas.

He leveled the gun at her. She threw back her head suddenly, her face contracting, and unloosed a sound of which, had Harry not heard it from a human throat, he would not have believed the larynx capable. It rang down the corridor and the stairs, in search of some waiting ear.

"Butterfield is here," said Valentin flatly. Harry nodded. In the same moment she came towards him, her features grotesquely contorted. She was strong and quick; a blur of venom that took him off-guard. He heard Valentin tell him to kill her, before she transformed. It took him a moment to grasp the significance of this, by which time she had her teeth at his throat. One of her hands was a cold vice around his wrist; he sensed strength in her sufficient to powder his bones. His fingers were already numbed by her grip; he had no time to do more than depress the trigger. The gun went off. Her breath on his throat seemed to gush from her. Then she loosed her hold on him, and staggered back. The shot had blown open her abdomen. He shook to see what he had done. The creature, for all its shriek, still resembled a woman he

might have loved.

"Good," said Valentin, as the blood hit the office floor in gouts. "Now it must show itself."

Hearing him, she shook her head. "This is all there is to show," she said.

Harry threw the gun down. "My God," he said softly, “it's her.

Dorothea grimaced. The blood continued to come.

"Some part of her," she replied.

"Have you always been with them then?" Valentin asked.

"Of course not."

"Why then?"

"Nowhere to go…" she said, her voice fading by the syllable. "Nothing to believe in. All lies. Everything: lies." "So you sided with Butterfield?"

"Better Hell," she said, “than a false Heaven."

"Who taught you that?" Harry murmured.

"Who do you think?" she replied, turning her gaze on him. Though her strength was going out of her with the blood, her eyes still blazed. "You're finished, D'Amour," she said. "You, and the demon, and Swann. There's nobody left to help you now."

Despite the contempt in her words he couldn't stand and watch her bleed to death. Ignoring Valentin's imperative that he keep clear, he went across to her. As he stepped within range she lashed out at him with astonishing force. The blow blinded him a moment; he fell against the tall filing cabinet, which toppled sideways. He and it hit the ground together. It spilled papers; he, curses. He was vaguely aware that the woman was moving past him to escape, but he was too busy keeping his head from spinning to prevent her. When equilibrium returned she had gone, leaving her bloody handprints on wall and door.

Chaplin, the janitor, was protective of his territory. The basement of the building was a private domain in which he sorted through office trash, and fed his beloved furnace, and read aloud his favourite

passages from the Good Book; all without fear of interruption. His bowels – which were far from healthy – allowed him little slumber. A couple of hours a night, no more, which he supplemented with dozing through the day. It was not so bad. He had the seclusion of the basement to retire to whenever life upstairs became too demanding; and the forced heat would sometimes bring strange waking dreams.

Was this such a dream; this insipid fellow in his fine suit? If not, how had he gained access to the basement, when the door was locked and bolted? He asked no questions of the intruder. Something about the way the man stared at him baffled his tongue. "Chaplin," the fellow said, his thin lips barely moving, "I'd like you to open the furnace." In other circumstances he might well have picked up his shovel and clouted the stranger across the head. The furnace was his baby. He knew, as no-one else knew, its quirks and occasional petulance; he loved, as no-one else loved, the roar it gave when it was content; he did not take kindly to the proprietorial tone the man used. But he'd lost the will to resist. He picked up a rag and opened the peeling door, offering its hot heart to this man as Lot had offered his daughters to the stranger in Sodom.

Butterfield smiled at the smell of heat from the furnace. From three floors above he heard the woman crying out for help; and then, a few moments later, a shot. She had failed. He had thought she would. But her life was forfeit anyway. There was no loss in sending her into the breach, in the slim chance that she might have coaxed the body from its keepers. It would have saved the inconvenience of a full-scale attack, but no matter. To have Swann's soul was worth any effort. He had defiled the good name of the Prince of Lies. For that he would suffer as no other miscreant magician ever had. Beside Swann's punishment, Faust's would be an inconvenience, and Napoleon's a pleasure- cruise.

As the echoes of the shot died above, he took the black lacquer box from his jacket pocket. The janitor's eyes were turned heavenward. He too had heard the shot.

"It was nothing," Butterfield told him. "Stoke the fire." Chaplin obeyed. The heat in the cramped basement rapidly grew. The janitor began to sweat; his visitor did not. He stood mere feet from the open furnace door and gazed into the brightness with impassive features. At last, he seemed satisfied.

"Enough," he said, and opened the lacquer box. Chaplin thought he glimpsed movement in the box, as though it were full to the lid with

maggots, but before he had a chance to look more closely both the box and contents were pitched into the flames.

"Close the door," Butterfield said. Chaplin obeyed. "You may watch over them awhile, if it pleases you. They need the heat. It makes them mighty."

He left the janitor to keep his vigil beside the furnace, and went back up to the hallway. He had left the street door open, and a pusher had come in out of the cold to do business with a client. They bartered in the shadows, until the pusher caught sight of the lawyer.

"Don't mind me," Butterfield said, and started up the stairs. He found the widow Swann on the first landing. She was not quite dead, but he quickly finished the job D'Amour had started.

"We're in trouble," said Valentin. "I hear noises down- stairs. Is there any other way out of here?" Harry sat on the floor, leaning against the toppled cabinet, and tried not to think of Dorothea's face as the bullet found her, or of the creature he was now reduced to needing.

"There's a fire escape," he said, “it runs down to the back of the building."

"Show me," said Valentin, attempting to haul him to his feet.

"Keep your hands off me!"

Valentin withdrew, bruised by the rebuffal. "I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe I shouldn't hope for your acceptance. But I do."

Harry said nothing, just got to his feet amongst the litter of reports and photographs. He'd had a dirty life: spying on adulteries for vengeful spouses; dredging gutters for lost children; keeping company with scum because it rose to the top, and the rest just drowned. Could Valentin's soul be much grimier?

"The fire escape's down the hall," he said.

"We can still get Swann out," Valentin said. "Still give him a decent cremation -“ The demon's obsession with his master's dignity was chastening, in its way. "But you have to help me, Harry."

I'll help you," he said, avoiding sight of the creature. "Just don't expect love and affection."

If it were possible to hear a smile, that's what he heard.

They want this over and done with before dawn," the demon said.

"It can't be far from that now."

"An hour, maybe," Valentin replied. "But it's enough. Either way, it's enough."

The sound of the furnace soothed Chaplin; its rumbles and rattlings were as familiar as the complaint of his own intestines. But there was another sound growing behind the door, the like of which he'd never heard before. His mind made foolish pictures to go with it. Of pigs laughing; of glass and barbed wire being ground between the teeth; of hoofed feet dancing on the door. As the noises grew so did his trepidation, but when he went to the basement door to summon help it was locked; the key had gone. And now, as if matters weren't bad enough, the light went out. He began to fumble for a prayer – "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour -" But he stopped when a voice addressed him, quite clearly.

"Michelmas," it said.

It was unmistakably his mother. And there could be no doubt of its source, either. It came from the furnace. "Michelmas," she demanded, "are you going to let me cook in here?"

It wasn't possible, of course, that she was there in the flesh: she'd been dead thirteen long years. But some phantom, perhaps? He believed in phantoms. Indeed he'd seen them on occasion, coming and going from the cinemas on 42nd Street, arm in arm.

"Open up, Michelmas," his mother told him, in that special voice she used when she had some treat for him. Like a good child, he approached the door. He had never felt such heat off the furnace as he felt now; he could smell the hairs on his arms wither.

"Open the door," Mother said again. There was no denying her. Despite the searing air, he reached to comply.

"That fucking janitor," said Harry, giving the sealed fire escape door a vengeful kick. "This door's supposed to be left unlocked at all times." He pulled at the chains that were wrapped around the handles. "We'll have to take the stairs."

There was a noise from back down the corridor; a roar in the

heating system which made the antiquated radiators rattle. At that moment, down in the basement, Michelmas Chaplin was obeying his mother, and opening the furnace door. A scream climbed from below as his face was blasted off. Then, the sound of the basement door being smashed open. Harry looked at Valentin, his repugnance momentarily forgotten.

"We shan't be taking the stairs," the demon said. Bellowings and chatterings and screechings were already on the rise. Whatever had found birth in the basement, it was precocious.

"We have to find something to break down the door, Valentin said, “anything."

Harry tried to think his way through the adjacent offices, his mind's eye peeled for some tool that would make an impression on either the fire door or the substantial chains which kept it closed. But there was nothing useful: only typewriters and filing cabinets.

"Think, man," said Valentin.

He ransacked his memory. Some heavy-duty instrument was required. A crowbar; a hammer. An axe! There was an agent called Shapiro on the floor below, who exclusively represented porno performers, one of whom had attempted to blow his balls off the month before. She'd failed, but he'd boasted one day on the stairs that he had now purchased the biggest axe he could find, and would happily take the head off any client who attempted an attack upon his person.

The commotion from below was simmering down.

The hush was, in its way, more distressing than the din that had preceded it.

"We haven't got much time," the demon said.

Harry left him at the chained door. "Can you get Swann?" he said as he ran.

I'll do my best."

By the time Harry reached the top of the stairs the last chatterings were dying away; as he began down the flight they ceased altogether. There was no way now to judge how close the enemy were. On the next floor? Round the next corner? He tried not to think of them, but

his feverish imagination populated every dirty shadow. He reached the bottom of the flight without incident, however, and slunk along the darkened second-floor corridor to Shapiro's office. Halfway to his destination, he heard a low hiss behind him. He looked over his shoulder, his body itching to run. One of the radiators, heated beyond its limits, had sprung a leak. Steam was escaping from its pipes, and hissing as it went. He let his heart climb down out of his mouth, and then hurried on to the door of Shapiro's office, praying that the man hadn't simply been shooting the breeze with his talk of axes. If so, they were done for. The office was locked, of course, but he elbowed the frosted glass out, and reached through to let himself in, fumbling for the light switch. The walls were plastered with photographs of sex-goddesses. They scarcely claimed Harry's attention; his panic fed upon itself with every heartbeat he spent here. Clumsily he scoured the office, turning furniture over in his impatience. But there was no sign of Shapiro's axe.

Now, another noise from below. It crept up the staircase and along the corridor in search of him – an unearthly cacophony like the one he'd heard on 83rd Street. It set his teeth on edge; the nerve of his rotting molar began to throb afresh. What did the music signal? Their advance?

In desperation he crossed to Shapiro's desk to see if the man had any other item that might be pressed into service, and there tucked out of sight between desk and wall, he found the axe. He pulled it from hiding. As Shapiro had boasted, it was hefty, its weight the first reassurance Harry had felt in too long. He returned to the corridor. The steam from the fractured pipe had thickened. Through its veils it was apparent that the concert had taken on new fervor. The doleful wailing rose and fell, punctuated by some flaccid percussion. He braved the cloud of steam and hurried to the stairs. As he put his foot on the bottom step the music seemed to catch him by the back of the neck, and whisper: "Listen' in his ear. He had no desire to listen; the music was vile. But somehow – while he was distracted by finding the axe – it had wormed its way into his skull. It drained his limbs of strength. In moments the axe began to seem an impossible burden.

"Come on down," the music coaxed him, “come on down and join the band."

Though he tried to form the simple word "No', the music was gaining influence upon him with every note played. He began to hear melodies in the caterwauling; long circuitous themes that made his blood sluggish and his thoughts idiot. He knew there was no pleasure

to be had at the music's source – that it tempted him only to pain and desolation – yet he could not shake its delirium off. His feet began to move to the call of the pipers. He forgot Valentin, Swann and all ambition for escape, and instead began to descend the stairs. The melody became more intricate. He could hear voices now, singing some charmless accompaniment in a language he didn't comprehend. From somewhere above, he heard his name called, but he ignored the summons. The music clutched him close, and now – as he descended the next flight of stairs – the musicians came into view.

They were brighter than he had anticipated, and more various. More baroque in their configurations (the manes, the multiple heads); more particular in their decoration (the suit of flayed faces; the rouged anus); and, his drugged eyes now stung to see, more atrocious in their choice of instruments. Such instruments! Byron was there, his bones sucked clean and drilled with stops, his bladder and lungs teased through slashes in his body as reservoirs for the piper's breath. He was draped, inverted, across the musician's lap, and even now was played upon – the sacs ballooning, the tongueless head giving out a wheezing note. Dorothea was slumped beside him, no less transformed, the strings of her gut made taut between her splinted legs like an obscene lyre; her breasts drummed upon. There were other instruments too, men who had come off the street and fallen prey to the band. Even Chaplin was there, much of his flesh burned away, his rib-cage played upon indifferently well.

"I didn't take you for a music lover," Butterfield said, drawing upon a cigarette, and smiling in welcome. "Put down your axe and join us."

The word axe reminded Harry of the weight in his hands, though he couldn't find his way through the bars of music to remember what it signified.

"Don't be afraid," Butterfield said, “you're an innocent in this. We hold no grudge against you." "Dorothea…" he said.

"She was an innocent too," said the lawyer, “until we showed her some sights."

Harry looked at the woman's body; at the terrible changes that they had wrought upon her. Seeing them, a tremor began in him, and something came between him and the music; the imminence of tears blotted it out. "Put down the axe," Butterfield told him.

But the sound of the concert could not compete with the grief that

was mounting in him. Butterfield seemed to see the change in his eyes; the disgust and anger growing there. He dropped his half-smoked cigarette and signaled for the music-making to stop.

"Must it be death, then?" Butterfield said, but the enquiry was scarcely voiced before Harry started down the last few stairs towards him. He raised the axe and swung it at the lawyer but the blow was misplaced. The blade ploughed the plaster of the wall, missing its target by a foot.

At this eruption of violence the musicians threw down their instruments and began across the lobby, trailing their coats and tails in blood and grease. Harry caught their advance from the corner of his eye. Behind the horde, still rooted in the shadows, was another form, larger than the largest of the mustered demons, from which there now came a thump that might have been that of a vast jack-hammer. He tried to make sense of sound or sight, but could do neither. There was no time for curiosity; the demons were almost upon him.

Butterfield glanced round to encourage their advance, and Harry – catching the moment – swung the axe a second time. The blow caught Butterfield's shoulder; the arm was instantly severed. The lawyer shrieked; blood sprayed the wall. There was no time for a third blow, however. The demons were reaching for him, smiles lethal. He turned on the stairs, and began up them, taking the steps two, three and four at a time. Butterfield was still shrieking below; from the flight above he heard Valentin calling his name. He had neither time nor breath to answer. They were on his heels, their ascent a din of grunts and shouts and beating wings. And behind it all, the jackhammer thumped its way to the bottom of the flight, its noise more intimidating by far than the chatterings of the berserkers at his back. It was in his belly, that thump; in his bowels. Like death's heartbeat, steady and irrevocable. On the second landing he heard a whirring sound behind him, and half turned to see a human-headed moth the size of a vulture climbing the air towards him. He met it with the axe blade, and hacked it down. There was a cry of excitement from below as the body flapped down the stairs, its wings working like paddles. Harry sped up the remaining flight to where Valentin was standing, listening. It wasn't the chatter he was attending to, nor the cries of the lawyer; it was the jack-hammer.

"They brought the Raparee," he said.

"I wounded Butterfield -”

"I heard. But that won't stop them."

"We can still try the door."

"I think we're too late, my friend."

“Wo!" said Harry, pushing past Valentin. The demon had given up trying to drag Swann's body to the door, and had laid the magician out in the middle of the corridor, his hands crossed on his chest. In some last mysterious act of reverence he had set folded paper bowls at Swann's head and feet, and laid a tiny origami flower at his lips. Harry lingered only long enough to re-acquaint himself with the sweetness of Swann's expression, and then ran to the door and proceeded to hack at the chains. It would be a long job. The assault did more damage to the axe than to the steel links. He didn't dare give up, however. This was their only escape route now, other than flinging themselves to their deaths from one of the windows. That he would do, he decided, if the worst came to the worst. Jump and die, rather than be their plaything.

His arms soon became numb with the repeated blows. It was a lost cause; the chain was unimpaired. His despair was further fuelled by a cry from Valentin – a high, weeping call that he could not leave unanswered. He left the fire door and returned past the body of Swann to the head of the stairs.

The demons had Valentin. They swarmed on him like wasps on a sugar stick, tearing him apart. For the briefest of moments he struggled free of their rage, and Harry saw the mask of humanity in rags and the truth glistening bloodily beneath. He was as vile as those besetting him, but Harry went to his aid anyway, as much to wound the demons as to save their prey.

The wielded axe did damage this way and that, sending Valentin's tormentors reeling back down the stairs, limbs lopped, faces opened. They did not all bleed. One sliced belly spilled eggs in thousands, one wounded head gave birth to tiny eels, which fled to the ceiling and hung there by their lips. In the melee he lost sight of Valentin. Forgot about him, indeed, until he heard the jack-hammer again, and remembered the broken look on Valentin's face when he'd named the thing. He'd called it the Raparee, or something like.

And now, as his memory shaped the word, it came into sight. It shared no trait with its fellows; it had neither wings nor mane nor vanity. It seemed scarcely even to be flesh, but forged, an engine that

needed only malice to keep its wheels turning.

At its appearance, the rest retreated, leaving Harry at the top of the stairs in a litter of spawn. Its progress was slow, its half dozen limbs moving in oiled and elaborate configurations to pierce the walls of the staircase and so haul itself up. It brought to mind a man on crutches, throwing the sticks ahead of him and levering his weight after, but there was nothing invalid in the thunder of its body; no pain in the white eye that burned in his sickle-head. Harry thought he had known despair, but he had not. Only now did he taste its ash in his throat. There was only the window left for him. That, and the welcoming ground. He backed away from the top of the stairs, forsaking the axe. Valentin was in the corridor. He was not dead, as Harry had presumed, but kneeling beside the corpse of Swann, his own body drooling from a hundred wounds. Now he bent close to the magician. Offering his apologies to his dead master, no doubt. But no. There was more to it than that. He had the cigarette lighter in his hand, and was lighting a taper. Then, murmuring some prayer to himself as he went, he lowered the taper to the mouth of the magician. The origami flower caught and flared up. Its flame was oddly bright, and spread with supernatural efficiency across Swann's face and down his body. Valentin hauled himself to his feet, the firelight burnishing his scales. He found enough strength to incline his head to the body as its cremation began, and then his wounds overcame him. He fell backwards, and lay still. Harry watched as the flames mounted. Clearly the body had been sprinkled with gasoline or something similar, for the fire raged up in moments, gold and green.

Suddenly, something took hold of his leg. He looked down to see that a demon, with flesh like ripe raspberries, still had an appetite for him. Its tongue was coiled around Harry's shin; its claws reached for his groin. The assault made him forget the cremation or the Raparee. He bent to tear at the tongue with his bare hands, but its slickness confounded his attempts. He staggered back as the demon climbed his body, its limbs embracing him. The struggle took them to the ground, and they rolled away from the stairs, along the other arm of the corridor. The struggle was far from uneven; Harry's repugnance was at least the match of the demon's ardour. His torso pressed to the ground, he suddenly remembered the Raparee. Its advance reverberated in every board and wall. Now it came into sight at the top of the stairs, and turned its slow head towards Swann's funeral pyre. Even from this distance Harry could see that Valentin's last-ditch attempts to destroy his master's body had failed. The fire had scarcely begun to devour the magician. They would have him still.

Eyes on the Raparee, Harry neglected his more intimate enemy, and it thrust a piece of flesh into his mouth. His throat filled up with pungent fluid; he felt himself choking. Opening his mouth he bit down hard upon the organ, severing it. The demon did not cry out, but released sprays of scalding excrement from pores along its back, and disengaged itself. Harry spat its muscle out as the demon crawled away. Then he looked back towards the fire. All other concerns were forgotten in the face of what he saw.

Swann had stood up.

He was burning from head to foot. His hair, his clothes, his skin. There was no part of him that was not alight. But he was standing, nevertheless, and raising his hands to his audience in welcome.

The Raparee had ceased its advance. It stood a yard or two from Swann, its limbs absolutely still, as if it were mesmerised by this astonishing trick.

Harry saw another figure emerge from the head of the stairs. It was Butterfield. His stump was roughly tied off; a demon supported his lop-sided body.

Put out the fire," demanded the lawyer of the Raparee. "It's not so difficult."

The creature did not move.

"Go on," said Butterfield. "It's just a trick of his. He's dead, damn you. It's just conjuring."

"No," said Harry.

Butterfield looked his way. The lawyer had always been insipid. Now he was so pale his existence was surely in question.

"What do you know?" he said.

"It's not conjuring," said Harry. "It's magic."

Swann seemed to hear the word. His eyelids fluttered open, and he slowly reached into his jacket and with a flourish produced a handkerchief. It too was on fire. It too was unconsumed. As he shook it out tiny bright birds leapt from its folds on humming wings. The Raparee was entranced by this sleight-of-hand. Its gaze followed the illusory birds as they rose and were dispersed, and in that moment the

magician stepped forward and embraced the engine. It caught Swann's fire immediately, the flames spreading over its flailing limbs. Though it fought to work itself free of the magician's hold, Swann was not to be denied. He clasped it closer than a long-lost brother, and would not leave it be until the creature began to wither in the heat. Once the decay began it seemed the Raparee was devoured in seconds, but it was difficult to be certain. The moment – as in the best performances – was held suspended. Did it last a minute? Two minutes? Five? Harry would never know. Nor did he care to analyse. Disbelief was for cowards; and doubt a fashion that crippled the spine. He was content to watch – not knowing if Swann lived or died, if birds, fire, corridor or if he himself- Harry D'Amour – were real or illusory.

Finally, the Raparee was gone. Harry got to his feet. Swann was also standing, but his farewell performance was clearly over.

The defeat of the Raparee had bested the courage of the horde. They had fled, leaving Butterfield alone at the top of the stairs.

"This won't be forgotten, or forgiven," he said to Harry. "There's no rest for you. Ever. I am your enemy." "I hope so," said Harry.

He looked back towards Swann, leaving Butterfield to his retreat. The magician had laid himself down again. His eyes were closed, his hands replaced on his chest. It was as if he had never moved. But now the fire was showing its true teeth. Swann's flesh began to bubble, his clothes to peel off in smuts and smoke. It took a long while to do the job, but eventually the fire reduced the man to ash.

By that time it was after dawn, but today was Sunday, and Harry knew there would be no visitors to interrupt his labours. He would have time to gather up the remains; to pound the bone shards and put them with the ashes in a carrier bag. Then he would go out and find himself a bridge or a dock, and put Swann into the river. There was precious little of the magician left once the fire had done its work; and nothing that vaguely resembled a man.

Things came and went away; that was a kind of magic. And in between? Pursuits and conjurings; horrors, guises.

The occasional joy.

That there was room for joy; ah! That was magic too.

XXVII: THE LIFE OF DEATH

The newspaper was the first edition of the day, and Elaine devoured it from cover to cover as she sat in the hospital waiting room. An animal thought to be a panther – which had terrorised the neighbourhood of Epping Forest for two months – had been shot and found to be a wild dog. Archaeologists in the Sudan had discovered bone fragments which they opined might lead to a complete reappraisal of Man's origins. A young woman who had once danced with minor royalty had been found murdered near Clapham; a solo round-the- world yachtsman was missing; recently excited hopes of a cure for the common cold had been dashed. She read the global bulletins and the trivia with equal fervor – anything to keep her mind off the examination ahead – but today's news seemed very like yesterday's; only the names had been changed.

Doctor Sennett informed her that she was healing well, both inside and out, and was quite fit to return to her full responsibilities whenever she felt psychologically resilient enough. She should make another appointment for the first week of the new year, he told her, and come back for a final examination then. She left him washing his hands of her.

The thought of getting straight onto the bus and heading back to her rooms was repugnant after so much time sitting and waiting. She would walk a stop or two along the route, she decided. The exercise would be good for her, and the December day, though far from warm, was bright.

Her plans proved over-ambitious however. After only a few minutes of walking her lower abdomen began to ache, and she started to feel nauseous, so she turned off the main road to seek out a place where she could rest and drink some tea. She should eat too, she knew, though she had never had much appetite, and had less still since the operation. Her wanderings were rewarded. She found a small restaurant which, though it was twelve fifty-five, was not enjoying a roaring lunch-time trade. A small woman with unashamedly artificial red hair served her tea and a mushroom omelette. She did her best to eat, but didn't get very far. The waitress was plainly concerned. "Something wrong with the food?" she said, somewhat testily.

"Oh no," Elaine reassured her. "It's just me."

The waitress looked offended nevertheless.

Td like some more tea though, if I may?" Elaine said.

She pushed the plate away from her, hoping the waitress would claim it soon. The sight of the meal congealing on the patternless plate was doing nothing for her mood. She hated this unwelcome sensitivity in herself: it was absurd that a plate of uneaten eggs should bring these doldrums on, but she couldn't help herself. She found everywhere little echoes of her own loss. In the death, by a benign November and then the sudden frosts, of the bulbs in her window-sill box; in the thought of the wild dog she'd read of that morning, shot in Epping Forest. The waitress returned with fresh tea, but failed to take the plate. Elaine called her back, requesting that she do so. Grudgingly, she obliged.

There were no customers left in the place now, other than Elaine, and the waitress busied herself with removing the lunchtime menus from the tables and replacing them with those for the evening. Elaine sat staring out of the window. Veils of blue-grey smoke had crept down the street in recent minutes, solidifying the sunlight. "They're burning again," the waitress said. "Damn smell gets everywhere."

"What are they burning?"

"Used to be the community centre. They're knocking it down, and building a new one. It's a waste of tax- payers' money."

The smoke was indeed creeping into the restaurant. Elaine did not find it offensive; it was sweetly redolent of autumn, her favourite season. Intrigued, she finished her tea, paid for her meal, and then elected to wander along and find the source of the smoke. She didn't have far to walk. At the end of the street was a small square; the demolition site dominated it. There was one surprise however. The building that the waitress had described as a community centre was in fact a church; or had been. The lead and slates had already been stripped off the roof, leaving the joists bare to the sky; the windows had been denuded of glass; the turf had gone from the lawn at the side of the building, and two trees had been felled there. It was their pyre which provided the tantalising scent.

She doubted if the building had ever been beautiful, but there was enough of its structure remaining for her to suppose it might have had charm. Its weathered stone was now completely at variance with the brick and concrete that surrounded it, but its besieged situation (the workmen labouring to undo it; the bulldozer on hand, hungry for rubble) gave it a certain glamour. One or two of the workmen noticed

her standing watching them, but none made any move to stop her as she walked across the square to the front porch of the church and peered inside. The interior, stripped of its decorative stonework, of pulpit, pews, font and the rest, was simply a stone room, completely lacking in atmosphere or authority. Somebody, however, had found a source of interest here. At the far end of the church a man stood with his back to Elaine, staring intently at the ground. Hearing footsteps behind him he looked round guiltily.

"Oh," he said. "I won't be a moment."

"It's all right -" Elaine said. "I think we're probably both trespassing."

The man nodded. He was dressed soberly – even drearily – but for his green bow-tie. His features, despite the garb and the grey hairs of a man in middle-age, were curiously unlined, as though neither smile nor frown much ruffled their perfect indifference.

"Sad, isn't it?" he said. "Seeing a place like this."

"Did you know the church as it used to be?"

"I came in on occasion," he said, "but it was never very popular."

"What's it called?"

"All Saints. It was built in the late seventeenth century, I believe. Are you fond of churches?"

"Not particularly. It was just that I saw the smoke, and…"

"Everybody likes a demolition scene," he said.

"Yes," she replied, "I suppose that's true."

"It's like watching a funeral. Better them than us, eh?"

She murmured something in agreement, her mind flitting elsewhere. Back to the hospital. To her pain and her present healing. To her life saved only by losing the capacity for further life. Better them than us. "My name's Kavanagh," he said, covering the short distance between them, his hand extended. "How do you do?" she said. I'm Elaine Rider."

"Elaine," he said. "Charming."

"Are you just taking a final look at the place before it comes down?"

"That's right. I've been looking at the inscriptions on the floor stones. Some of them are most eloquent." He brushed a fragment of timber off one of the tablets with his foot. "It seems such a loss. I'm sure they'll just smash the stones to smithereens when they start to pull the floor up -"

She looked down at the patchwork of tablets beneath her feet. Not all were marked, and of those that were many simply carried names and dates. There were some inscriptions however. One, to the left of where Kavanagh was standing, carried an all but eroded relief of crossed shin-bones, like drum-sticks, and the abrupt motto: Redeem the time.

"I think there must have been a crypt under here at some time," Kavanagh said.

"Oh. I see. And these are the people who were buried there."

"Well, I can't think of any other reason for the inscriptions, can you? I was thinking of asking the work men…" he paused in mid-sentence,"… you'll probably think this positively morbid of me…"

"What?"

"Well, just to preserve one or two of the finer stones from being destroyed."

"I don't think that's morbid," she said. They're very beautiful."

He was evidently encouraged by her response. "Maybe I should speak with them now," he said. "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

He left her standing in the nave like a forsaken bride, while he went out to quiz one of the workmen. She wandered down to where the altar had been, reading the names as she went. Who knew or cared about these people's resting places now? Dead two hundred years and more, and gone away not into loving posterity but into oblivion. And suddenly the unarticulated hopes for an after-life she had nursed through her thirty-four years slipped away; she was no longer weighed down by some vague ambition for heaven. One day, perhaps this day, she would die, just as these people had died, and it wouldn't matter a jot. There was nothing to come, nothing to aspire to, nothing to dream of. She stood in a patch of smoke-thickened sun, thinking of this, and was almost happy.

Kavanagh returned from his exchanges with the foreman.

"There is indeed a crypt," he said, “but it hasn't been emptied yet."

"Oh."

They were still underfoot, she thought. Dust and bones.

"Apparently they're having some difficulty getting into it. All the entrances have been sealed up. That's why they're digging around the foundations. To find another way in."

"Are crypts normally sealed up?"

"Not as thoroughly as this one."

"Maybe there was no more room," she said.

Kavanagh took the comment quite seriously. "Maybe," he said.

"Will they give you one of the stones?"

He shook his head. "It's not up to them to say. These are just council lackeys. Apparently they have a firm of professional excavators to come in and shift the bodies to new burial sites. It all has to be done with due decorum." "Much they care," Elaine said, looking down at the stones again.

"I must agree," Kavanagh replied. "It all seems in excess of the facts. But then perhaps we're not God- fearing enough."

"Probably."

"Anyhow, they told me to come back in a day or two's time, and ask the removal men."

She laughed at the thought of the dead moving house; packing up their goods and chattels. Kavanagh was pleased to have made a joke, even if it had been unintentional. Riding on the crest of this success, he said: "I wonder, may I take you for a drink?"

"I wouldn't be very good company, I'm afraid," she said. "I'm really very tired."

"We could perhaps meet later," he said.

She looked away from his eager face. He was pleasant enough, in his uneventful way. She liked his green bow-tie surely a joke at the expense of his own drabness. She liked his seriousness too. But she

couldn't face the idea of drinking with him; at least not tonight. She made her apologies, and explained that she'd been ill recently and hadn't recovered her stamina.

"Another night perhaps?" he enquired gently. The lack of aggression in his courtship was persuasive, and she said: That would be nice. Thank you."

Before they parted they exchanged telephone numbers. He seemed charmingly excited by the thought of their meeting again; it made her feel, despite all that had been taken from her, that she still had her sex. She returned to the flat to find both a parcel from Mitch and a hungry cat on the doorstep. She fed the demanding animal, then made herself some coffee and opened the parcel. In it, cocooned in several layers of tissue paper, she found a silk scarf, chosen with Mitch's uncanny eye for her taste. The note along with it simply said: It's your colour. I love you. Mitch.

She wanted to pick up the telephone on the spot and talk to him, but somehow the thought of hearing his voice seemed dangerous. Too close to the hurt, perhaps. He would ask her how she felt, and she would reply that she was well, and he would insist: yes, but really? And she would say: I'm empty; they took out half my innards, damn you, and I'll never have your children or anybody else's, so that's the end of that, isn't it? Even thinking about their talking she felt tears threaten, and in a fit of inexplicable rage she wrapped the scarf up in the desiccated paper and buried it at the back of her deepest drawer. Damn him for trying to make things better now, when at the time she'd most needed him all he'd talked of was fatherhood, and how her tumours would deny it him.

It was a clear evening – the sky's cold skin stretched to breaking point. She did not want to draw the curtains in the front room, even though passers-by would stare in, because the deepening blue was too fine to miss. So she sat at the window and watched the dark come. Only when the last change had been wrought did she close off the chill. She had no appetite, but she made herself some food nevertheless, and sat down to watch television as she ate. The food unfinished, she laid down her tray, and dozed, the programmes filtering through to her intermittently. Some witless comedian whose merest cough sent his audience into paroxysms; a natural history programme on life in the Serengeti; the news. She had read all that she needed to know that morning: the headlines hadn't changed. One item, however, did pique her curiosity: an interview with the solo yachtsman, Michael Maybury, who had been picked up that day after

two weeks adrift in the Pacific. The interview was being beamed from Australia, and the contact was bad; the image of Maybury's bearded and sun-scorched face was constantly threatened with being snowed out. The picture mattered little: the account he gave of his failed voyage was riveting in sound alone, and in particular an event that seemed to distress him afresh even as he told it. He had been becalmed, and as his vessel lacked a motor had been obliged to wait for wind. It had not come. A week had gone by with his hardly moving a kilometer from the same spot of listless ocean; no bird or passing ship broke the monotony. With every hour that passed, his claustrophobia grew, and on the eighth day it reached panic proportions, so he let himself over the side of the yacht and swam away from the vessel, a life-line tied about his middle, in order to escape the same few yards of deck. But once away from the yacht, and treading the still, warm water, he had no desire to go back. Why not untie the knot, he'd thought to himself, and float away.

"What made you change your mind?" the interviewer asked.

Here Maybury frowned. He had clearly reached the crux of his story, but didn't want to finish it. The interviewer repeated the question.

At last, hesitantly, the sailor responded. "I looked back at the yacht," he said, “and I saw somebody on the deck." The interviewer, not certain that he'd heard correctly, said: "Somebody on the deck?"

"That's right," Maybury replied. "Somebody was there. I saw a figure quite clearly; moving around." "Did you… did you recognise this stowaway?" the question came.

Maybury's face closed down, sensing that his story was being treated with mild sarcasm.

"Who was it?" the interviewer pressed.

"I don't know," Maybury said. "Death, I suppose."

The questioner was momentarily lost for words.

"But of course you returned to the boat, eventually."

"Of course."

"And there was no sign of anybody?"

Maybury glanced up at the interviewer, and a look of contempt crossed his face.

"I've survived, haven't I?" he said.

The interviewer mumbled something about not understanding his point.

"I didn't drown," Maybury said. "I could have died then, if I'd wanted to. Slipped off the rope and drowned." "But you didn't. And the next day -"

The next day the wind picked up."

"It's an extraordinary story," the interviewer said, con- tent that the stickiest part of the exchange was now safely bypassed. "You must be looking forward to seeing your family again for Christmas…"

Elaine didn't hear the final exchange of pleasantries. Her imagination was tied by a fine rope to the room she was sitting in; her fingers toyed with the knot. If Death could find a boat in the wastes of the Pacific, how much easier it must be to find her. To sit with her, perhaps, as she slept. To watch her as she went about her mourning. She stood up and turned the television off. The flat was suddenly silent. She questioned the hush impatiently, but it held no sign of guests, welcome or unwelcome.

As she listened, she could taste salt-water. Ocean, no doubt.

She had been offered several refuges in which to convalesce when she came out of hospital. Her father had invited her up to Aberdeen; her sister Rachel had made several appeals for her to spend a few weeks in Buckinghamshire; there had even been a pitiful telephone call from Mitch, in which he had talked of their holidaying together. She had rejected them all, telling them that she wanted to re-establish the rhythm of her previous life as soon as possible: to return to her job, to her working colleagues and friends. In fact, her reasons had gone deeper than that. She had feared their sympathies, feared that she would be held too close in their affections and quickly come to rely upon them. Her streak of independence, which had first brought her to this unfriendly city, was in studied defiance of her smothering appetite for security. If she gave in to those loving appeals she knew she would take root in domestic soil and not look up and out again for another year. In which time, what adventures might have passed her by? Instead she had returned to work as soon as she felt able, hoping that although she had not taken on all her former responsibilities the

familiar routines would help her to re-establish a normal life. But the sleight-of-hand was not entirely successful. Every few days something would happen – she would overhear some remark, or catch a look that she was not intended to see – that made her realise she was being treated with a rehearsed caution; that her colleagues viewed her as being fundamentally changed by her illness. It had made her angry. She'd wanted to spit her suspicions in their faces; tell them that she and her uterus were not synonymous, and that the removal of one did not imply the eclipse of the other.

But today, returning to the office, she was not so certain they weren't correct. She felt as though she hadn't slept in weeks, though in fact she was sleeping long and deeply every night. Her eyesight was blurred, and there was a curious remoteness about her experiences that day that she associated with extreme fatigue, as if she were drifting further and further from the work on her desk; from her sensations, from her very thoughts. Twice that morning she caught herself speaking and then wondered who it was who was conceiving of these words. It certainly wasn't her; she was too busy listening.

And then, an hour after lunch, things had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. She had been called into her supervisor's office and asked to sit down.

"Are you all right, Elaine?" Mr. Chimes had asked.

"Yes," she'd told him. "I'm fine."

There's been some concern -”

"About what?"

Chimes looked slightly embarrassed. "Your behaviour," he finally said. "P lease don't think I'm prying, Elaine. It's just that if you need some further time to recuperate -”

"There's nothing wrong with me."

"But your weeping -”

"What?"

"The way you've been crying today. It concerns us."

"Cry?" she'd said. "I don't cry."

The supervisor seemed baffled. "But you've been crying all day. You're crying now."

Elaine put a tentative hand to her cheek. And yes; yes, she was crying. Her cheek was wet. She'd stood up, shocked at her own conduct.

"I didn't… I didn't know," she said. Though the words sounded preposterous, they were true. She hadn't known. Only now, with the fact pointed out, did she taste tears in her throat and sinuses; and with that taste came a memory of when this eccentricity had begun: in front of the television the night before.

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"Yes."

"Take the rest of the week if you'd like," Chimes said. "You're a valued member of staff, Elaine; I don't have to tell you that. We don't want you coming to any harm." This last remark struck home with stinging force. Did they think she was verging on suicide; was that why she was treated with kid gloves? They were only tears she was shedding, for God's sake, and she was so indifferent to them she had not even known they were falling. "I'll go home," she said. "Thank you for your… concern."

The supervisor looked at her with some dismay. "It must have been a very traumatic experience," he said. "We all understand; we really do. If you feel you want to talk about it at any time -"

She declined, but thanked him again and left the office.

Face to face with herself in the mirror of the women's toilets she realised just how bad she looked. Her skin was flushed, her eyes swollen. She did what she could to conceal the signs of this painless grief, then picked up her coat and started home. As she reached the underground station she knew that returning to the empty flat would not be a wise idea. She would brood, she would sleep (so much sleep of late, and so perfectly dreamless) but she would not improve her mental condition by either route. It was the bell of Holy Innocents, tolling in the clear afternoon, that reminded her of the smoke and the square and Mr. Kavanagh.

There, she decided, was a fit place for her to walk. She could enjoy the sunlight, and think. Maybe she would meet her admirer again.

She found her way back to All Saints easily enough, but there was disappointment awaiting her. The demolition site had been cordoned off, the boundary marked by a row of posts – a red fluorescent ribbon looped between them. The site was guarded by no less than four policemen, who were ushering pedestrians towards a detour around the square. The workers and their hammers had been exiled from the shadows of All Saints and now a very different selection of people – suited and academic – occupied the zone beyond the ribbon, some in furrowed conversation, others standing on the muddy ground and staring up quizzically at the derelict church. The south transept and much of the area around it had been curtained off from public view by an arrangement of tarpaulins and black plastic sheeting. Occasionally somebody would emerge from behind this veil and consult with others on the site. All who did so, she noted, were wearing gloves; one or two were also masked. It was as though they were performing some ad hoc surgery in the shelter of the screen. A tumour, perhaps, in the bowels of All Saints.

She approached one of the officers. "What's going on?"

"The foundations are unstable," he told her. "Apparently the place could fall down at any moment." "Why are they wearing masks?"

"It's just a precaution against the dust."

She didn't argue, though this explanation struck her as unlikely.

"If you want to get through to Temple Street you'll have to go round the back," the officer said. What she really wanted to do was to stand and watch proceedings, but the proximity of the uniformed quartet intimidated her, and she decided to give up and go home. As she began to make her way back to the main road she caught sight of a familiar figure crossing the end of an adjacent street. It was unmistakably Kavanagh. She called after him, though he had already disappeared, and was pleased to see him step back into view and return a nod to her.

"Well, well -" he said as he came down to meet her. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon." "I came to watch the rest of the demolition," she said.

His face was ruddy with the cold, and his eyes were shining.

I'm so pleased," he said. "Do you want to have some afternoon tea? There's a place just around the corner." I'd like that."

As they walked she asked him if he knew what was going on at All Saints.

"It's the crypt," he said, confirming her suspicions.

“They opened it?"

"They certainly found a way in. I was here this morning -”

"About your stones?"

That's right. They were already putting up the tarpaulins then."

"Some of them were wearing masks."

"It won't smell very fresh down there. Not after so long."

Thinking of the curtain of tarpaulin drawn between her and the mystery within she said: "I wonder what it's like." "A wonderland," Kavanagh replied.

It was an odd response, and she didn't query it, at least not on the spot. But later, when they'd sat and talked together for an hour, and she felt easier with him, she returned to the comment.

"What you said about the crypt…"

"Yes?"

"About it being a wonderland."

"Did I say that?" he replied, somewhat sheepishly. "What must you think of me?"

"I was just puzzled. Wondered what you meant."

"I like places where the dead are," he said. "I always have. Cemeteries can be very beautiful, don't you think? Mausoleums and tombs; all the fine craftsmanship that goes into those places. Even the dead may sometimes reward closer scrutiny." He looked at her to see if he had strayed beyond her taste threshold, but seeing that she only looked at him with quiet fascination, continued. They can be very beautiful on occasion. It's a sort of a glamour they have. It's a shame it's wasted on morticians and funeral directors." He made a small mischievous grin. "I'm sure there's much to be seen in that crypt. Strange sights. Wonderful sights."

"I only ever saw one dead person. My grandmother, I was very young at the time…"

"I trust it was a pivotal experience."

"I don't think so. In fact I scarcely remember it at all, I only remember how everybody cried."

"Ah."

He nodded sagely.

"So selfish," he said. "Don't you think? Spoiling a farewell with snot and sobs." Again, he looked at her to gauge the response; again he was satisfied that she would not take offence. "We cry for ourselves, don't we? Not for the dead. The dead are past caring."

She made a small, soft: "Yes," and then, more loudly: "My God, yes. That's right. Always for ourselves…" "You see how much the dead can teach, just by lying there, twiddling their thumb-bones?"

She laughed: he joined her in laughter. She had misjudged him on that initial meeting, thinking his face unused to smiles; it was not. But his features, when the laughter died, swiftly regained that eerie quiescence she had first noticed.

When, after a further half hour of his laconic remarks, he told her he had appointments to keep and had to be on his way, she thanked him for his company, and said: "Nobody's made me laugh so much in weeks. I'm grateful." "You should laugh," he told her. "It suits you." Then added: "You have beautiful teeth."

She thought of this odd remark when he'd gone, as she did of a dozen others he had made through the afternoon. He was undoubtedly one of the most off-beat individuals she'd ever encountered, but he had come into her life – with his eagerness to talk of crypts and the dead and the beauty of her teeth – at just the right moment. He was the perfect distraction from her buried sorrows, making her present aberrations seem minor stuff beside his own. When she started home she was in high spirits. If she had not known herself better she might have thought herself half in love with him. On the journey back, and later that evening, she thought particularly of the joke he had made about the dead twiddling their thumb-bones, and that thought led inevitably to the mysteries that lay out of sight in the crypt. Her curiosity, once aroused, was not easily silenced; it grew on her steadily that she badly wanted to slip through that cordon of ribbon

and see the burial chamber with her own eyes. It was a desire she would never previously have admitted to herself. (How many times had she walked from the site of an accident, telling herself to control the shameful inquisitiveness she felt?) But Kavanagh had legitimised her appetite with his flagrant enthusiasm for things funereal. Now, with the taboo shed, she wanted to go back to All Saints and look Death in its face, then next time she saw Kavanagh she would have some stories to tell of her own. The idea, no sooner budded, came to full flower, and in the middle of the evening she dressed for the street again and headed back towards the square. She didn't reach All Saints until well after eleven- thirty, but there were still signs of activity at the site. Lights, mounted on stands and on the wall of the church itself, poured illumination on the scene. A trio of technicians, Kavanagh's so-called removal men, stood outside the tarpaulin shelter, their faces drawn with fatigue, their breath clouding the frosty air. She stayed out of sight and watched the scene. She was growing steadily colder, and her scars had begun to ache, but it was apparent that the night's work on the crypt was more or less over. After some brief exchange with the police, the technicians departed. They had extinguished all but one of the floodlights, leaving the site – church, tarpaulin and rimy mud – in grim chiaroscuro. The two officers who had been left on guard were not over-conscientious in their duties. What idiot, they apparently reasoned, would come grave-robbing at this hour, and in such temperatures? After a few minutes keeping a footstamping vigil they withdrew to the relative comfort of the workmen's hut. When they did not re-emerge, Elaine crept out of hiding and moved as cautiously as possible to the ribbon that divided one zone from the other. A radio had been turned on in the hut; its noise (music for lovers from dusk to dawn, the distant voice purred) covered her crackling advance across the frozen earth.

Once beyond the cordon, and into the forbidden territory beyond, she was not so hesitant. She swiftly crossed the hard ground, its wheel-ploughed furrows like concrete, into the lee of the church. The floodlight was dazzling; by it her breath appeared as solid as yesterday's smoke had seemed. Behind her, the music for lovers murmured on. No one emerged from the hut to summon her from her trespassing. No alarm-bells rang. She reached the edge of the tarpaulin curtain without incident, and peered at the scene concealed behind it.

The demolition men, under very specific instructions to judge by the care they had taken in their labours, had dug fully eight feet down the side of All Saints, exposing the foundations. In so doing they had uncovered an entrance to the burial-chamber which previous hands had been at pains to conceal. Not only had earth been piled up against

the flank of the church to hide the entrance, but the crypt door had also been removed, and stone masons sealed the entire aperture up. This had clearly been done at some speed; their handiwork was far from ordered. They had simply filled the entrance up with any stone or brick that had come to hand, and plastered coarse mortar over their endeavours. Into this mortar – though the design had been spoiled by the excavations – some artisan had scrawled a six-foot cross.

All their efforts in securing the crypt, and marking the mortar to keep the godless out, had gone for nothing however. The seal had been broken – the mortar hacked at, the stones torn away. There was now a small hole in the middle of the doorway, large enough for one person to gain access to the interior. Elaine had no hesitation in climbing down the slope to the breached wall, and then squirming through.

She had predicted the darkness she met on the other side, and had brought with her a cigarette lighter Mitch had given her three years ago. She flicked it on. The flame was small; she turned up the wick, and by the swelling light investigated the space ahead of her. It was not the crypt itself she had stepped into but a narrow vestibule of some kind: a yard or so in front of her was another wall, and another door. This one had not been replaced with bricks, though into its solid timbers a second cross had been gouged. She approached the door. The lock had been removed by the investigators presumably – and the door then held shut again with a rope binding. This had been done quickly, by tired fingers. She did not find the rope difficult to untie, though it required both hands, and so had to be effected in the dark.

As she worked the knot free, she heard voices. The policemen – damn them – had left the seclusion of their hut and come out into the bitter night to do their rounds. She let the rope be, and pressed herself against the inside wall of the vestibule. The officers' voices were becoming louder: talking of their children, and the escalating cost of Christmas joy. Now they were within yards of the crypt entrance, standing, or so she guessed, in the shelter of the tarpaulin. They made no attempt to descend the slope however, but finished their cursory inspection on the lip of the earthworks, then turned back. Their voices faded.

Satisfied that they were out of sight and hearing of her, she reignited the flame and returned to the door. It was large and brutally heavy; her first attempt at hauling it open met with little success. She tried again, and this time it moved, grating across the grit on the vestibule floor. Once it was open the vital inches required for her to

squeeze through she eased her straining. The lighter guttered as though a breath had blown from within; the flame briefly burned not yellow but electric blue. She didn't pause to admire it, but slid into the promised wonderland.

Now the flame fed – became livid – and for an instant its sudden brightness took her sight away. She pressed the corners of her eyes to clear them, and looked again. So this was Death. There was none of the art or the glamour Kavanagh had talked of; no calm laying out of shrouded beauties on cool marble sheets; no elaborate reliquaries, nor aphorisms on the nature of human frailty: not even names and dates. In most cases, the corpses lacked even coffins. The crypt was a charnel-house. Bodies had been thrown in heaps on every side; entire families pressed into niches that were designed to hold a single casket, dozens more left where hasty and careless hands had tossed them. The scene – though absolutely still – was rife with panic. It was there in the faces that stared from the piles of dead: mouths wide in silent protest, sockets in which eyes had withered gaping in shock at such treatment. It was there too in the way the system of burial had degenerated from the ordered arrangement of caskets at the far end of the crypt to the haphazard piling of crudely made coffins, their wood unplaned, their lids unmarked but for a scrawled cross, and thence – finally – to this hurried heaping of unhoused carcasses, all concern for dignity, perhaps even for the rites of passage, forgotten in the rising hysteria.

There had been a disaster, of that she could have no doubt; a sudden influx of bodies – men, women, children (there was a baby at her feet who could not have lived a day) – who had died in such escalating numbers that there was not even time to close their eyelids before they were shunted away into this pit. Perhaps the coffin-makers had also died, and were thrown here amongst their clients; the shroud-sewers too, and the priests. All gone in one apocalyptic month (or week), their surviving relatives too shocked or too frightened to consider the niceties, but only eager to have the dead thrust out of sight where they would never have to look on their flesh again.

There was much of that flesh still in evidence. The sealing of the crypt, closing it off from the decaying air, had kept the occupants intact. Now, with the violation of this secret chamber, the heat of decay had been rekindled, and the tissues were deteriorating afresh. Everywhere she saw rot at work, making sores and suppurations, blisters and pustules. She raised the flame to see better, though the stench of spoilage was beginning to crowd upon her and make her dizzy. Everywhere her eyes travelled she seemed to alight upon some

pitiful sight. Two children laid together as if sleeping in each other's arms; a woman whose last act, it appeared, had been to paint her sickened face so as to die more fit for the marriage-bed than the grave.

She could not help but stare, though her fascination cheated them of privacy. There was so much to see and remember. She could never be the same, could she, having viewed these scenes? One corpse – lying half-hidden beneath another – drew her particular attention: a woman whose long chestnut-coloured hair flowed from her scalp so copiously Elaine envied it. She moved closer to get a better look, and then, putting the last of her squeamishness to flight, took hold of the body thrown across the woman, and hauled it away. The flesh of the corpse was greasy to the touch, and left her lingers stained, but she was not distressed. The uncovered corpse lay with her legs wide, but the constant weight of her companion had bent them into an impossible configuration. The wound that had killed her had bloodied her thighs, and glued her skirt to her abdomen and groin. Had she miscarried, Elaine wondered, or had some disease devoured her there? She stared and stared, bending close to study the faraway look on the woman's rotted face. Such a place to lie, she thought, with your blood still shaming you. She would tell Kavanagh when next she saw him, how wrong he had been with his sentimental tales of calm beneath the sod.

She had seen enough; more than enough. She wiped her hands upon her coat and made her way back to the door, closing it behind her and knotting up the rope again as she had found it. Then she climbed the slope into the clean air. The policemen were nowhere in sight, and she slipped away unseen, like a shadow's shadow.

There was nothing for her to feel, once she had mastered her' initial disgust, and that twinge of pity she'd felt seeing the children and the woman with the chestnut hair; and even those responses – even the pity and the repugnance were quite manageable. She had felt both more acutely seeing a dog run down by a car than she had standing in the crypt of All Saints, despite the horrid displays on every side. When she laid her head down to sleep that night, and realised that she was neither trembling nor nauseous, she felt strong. What was there to fear in all the world if the spectacle of mortality she had just witnessed could be borne so readily? She slept deeply, and woke refreshed. She went back to work that morning, apologising to Chimes for her behaviour of the previous day, and reassuring him that she was now feeling happier than she'd felt in months. In order to prove her rehabilitation she was as gregarious as she could be, striking up conversations with neglected acquaintances, and giving her smile a

ready airing. This met with some initial resistance; she could sense her colleagues doubting that this bout of sunshine actually meant a summer. But when the mood was sustained throughout the day and through the day following, they began to respond more readily. By Thursday it was as though the tears of earlier in the week had never been shed. People told her how well she was looking. It was true; her mirror confirmed the rumours. Her eyes shone, her skin shone. She was a picture of vitality.

On Thursday afternoon she was sitting at her desk, working through a backlog of inquiries, when one of the secretaries appeared from the corridor and began to babble. Somebody went to the woman's aid; through the sobs it was apparent she was talking about Bernice, a woman Elaine knew well enough to exchange smiles with on the stairs, but no better. There had been an accident, it seemed; the woman was talking about blood on the floor. Elaine got up and joined those who were making their way out to see what the fuss was about. The supervisor was already standing outside the women's lavatories, vainly instructing the curious to keep clear. Somebody else – another witness, it seemed – was offering her account of events: "She was just standing there, and suddenly she started to shake. I thought she was having a fit. Blood started to come from her nose. Then from her mouth. Pouring out."

"There's nothing to see," Chimes insisted. "Please keep back." But he was substantially ignored. Blankets were being brought to wrap around the woman, and as soon as the toilet door was opened again the sight-seers pressed forward. Elaine caught sight of a form moving about on the toilet floor as if convulsed by cramps; she had no wish to see any more. Leaving the others to throng the corridor, talking loudly of Bernice as if she were already dead, Elaine returned to her desk. She had so much to do; so many wasted, grieving days to catch up on. An apt phrase flitted into her head. Redeem the time. She wrote the three words on her notebook as a reminder. Where did they come from? She couldn't recall. It didn't matter. Sometimes there was wisdom in forgetting.

Kavanagh rang her that evening, and invited her out to dinner the following night. She had to decline, however, eager as she was to discuss her recent exploits, because a small party was being thrown by several of her friends, to celebrate her return to health. Would he care to join them? she asked. He thanked her for the invitation, but replied that large numbers of people had always intimidated him. She told him not to be foolish: that her circle would be pleased to meet him, and she to show him off, but he replied he would only put in an

appearance if his ego felt the equal of it, and that if he didn't show up he hoped she wouldn't offended.

She soothed such fears. Before the conversation came to an end she slyly mentioned that next time they met she had a tale to tell.

The following day brought unhappy news. Bernice had died in the early hours of Friday morning, without ever regaining consciousness. The cause of death was as yet unverified, but the office gossips concurred that she had never been a strong woman – always the first amongst the secretaries to catch a cold and the last to shake it off. There was also some talk, though traded less loudly, about her personal behaviour. She had been generous with her favours it appeared, and injudicious in her choice of partners. With venereal diseases reaching epidemic proportions, was that not the likeliest explanation for the death?

The news, though it kept the rumourmongers in business, was not good for general morale. Two girls went sick that morning, and at lunchtime it seemed that Elaine was the only member of staff with an appetite. She compensated for the lack in her colleagues, however. She had a fierce hunger in her; her body almost seemed to ache for sustenance. It was a good feeling, after so many months of lassitude. When she looked around at the worn faces at the table she felt utterly apart from them: from their tittle-tattle and their trivial opinions, from the way their talk circled on the suddenness of Bernice's death as though they had not given the subject a moment's thought in years, and were amazed that their neglect had not rendered it extinct. Elaine knew better. She had come close to death so often in the recent past: during the months leading up to her hysterectomy, when the tumours had suddenly doubled in size as though sensing that they were plotted against; on the operating table, when twice the surgeons thought they'd lost her; and most recently, in the crypt, face to face with those gawping carcasses. Death was everywhere. That they should be so startled by its entrance into their charmless circle struck her as almost comical. She ate lustily, and let them talk in whispers.

They gathered for her party at Reuben's house – Elaine, Hermione, Sam and Nellwyn, Josh and Sonja. It was a good night; a chance to pick up on how mutual friends were faring; how statuses and ambitions were on the change. Everyone got drunk very quickly; tongues already loosened by familiarity became progressively looser. Nellwyn led a tearful toast to Elaine; Josh and Sonja had a short but acrimonious exchange on the subject of evangelism; Reuben did his impersonations of fellow barristers. It was like old times, except that

memory had yet to improve it. Kavanagh did not put in an appearance, and Elaine was glad of it. Despite her protestations when speaking to him she knew he would have felt out of place in such close-knit company. About half past midnight, when the room had settled into a number of quiet exchanges, Hermione mentioned the yachtsman. Though she was almost across the room, Elaine heard the sailor's name mentioned quite distinctly. She broke off her conversation with Nellwyn and picked her way through the sprawling limbs to join Hermione and Sam.

"I heard you talking about Maybury," she said.

"Yes," said Hermione, "Sam and I were just saying how strange it all was -"

"I saw him on the news," Elaine said.

"Sad story, isn't it?" Sam commented. "The way it happened."

"Why sad?"

"Him saying that: about Death being on the boat with him-"

"- And then dying," Hermione said.

"Dying?" said Elaine. "When was this?"

"It was in all the papers."

"I haven't been concentrating that much," Elaine replied. "What happened?"

"He was killed," Sam said. "They were taking him to the airport to fly him home, and there was an accident. He was killed just like that." H e snapped his middle finger and thumb. "Out like a light."

"So sad," said Hermione.

She glanced at Elaine, and a frown crept across her face. The look baffled Elaine until – with that same shock of recognition she'd felt in Chimes' office, discovering her tears – she realized that she was smiling. So the sailor was dead.

When the party broke up in the early hours of Saturday morning – when the embraces and the kisses were over and she was home again – she thought over the Maybury interview she'd heard, summoning a face scorched by the sun and eyes peeled by the wastes he'd almost

been lost to, thinking of his mixture of detachment and faint embarrassment as he'd told the tale of his stowaway. And, of course, those final words of his, when pressed to identify the stranger: "Death, I suppose," he'd said.

He'd been right.

She woke up late on Saturday morning, without the anticipated hangover. There was a letter from Mitch. She didn't open it, but left it on the mantelpiece for an idle moment later in the day. The first snow of winter was in the wind, though it was too wet to make any serious impression on the streets. The chill was biting enough however, to judge by the scowls on the faces of passers-by. She felt oddly immune from it, however. Though she had no heating on in the flat she walked around in her bathrobe, and barefoot, as though she had a fire stoked in her belly. After coffee she went through to wash. There was a spider clot of hair in the plug hole; she fished it out and dropped it down the lavatory, then returned to the sink. Since the removal of the dressings she had studiously avoided any close scrutiny of her body, but today her qualms and her vanity seemed to have disappeared. She stripped off her robe, and looked herself over critically. She was pleased with what she saw. Her breasts were full and dark, her skin had a pleasing sheen to it, her pubic hair had regrown more lushly than ever. The scars themselves still looked and felt tender, but her eyes read their lividness as a sign of her cunt's ambition, as though any day now her sex would grow from anus to navel (and beyond perhaps) opening her up; making her terrible. It was paradoxical, surely, that it was only now, when the surgeons had emptied her out, that she should feel so ripe, so resplendent. She stood for fully half an hour in front of the mirror admiring herself, her thoughts drifting off. Eventually she returned to the chore of washing. That done, she went back into the front room, still naked. She had no desire to conceal herself; quite the other way about. It was all she could do to prevent herself from stepping out into the snow and giving the whole street something to remember her by.

She crossed to the window, thinking a dozen such foolish thoughts. The snow had thickened. Through the flurries she caught a movement in the alley between the houses opposite. Somebody was there, watching her, though she couldn't see who. She didn't mind. She stood peeping at the peeper, wondering if he would have the courage to show himself, but he did not.

She watched for several minutes before she realised that her brazenness had frightened him away. Disappointed, she wandered

back to the bedroom and got dressed. It was time she found herself something to eat; she had that familiar fierce hunger upon her. The fridge was practically empty. She would have to go out and stock up for the weekend. Supermarkets were circuses, especially on a Saturday, but her mood was far too buoyant to be depressed by having to make her way through the crowds. Today she even found some pleasure in these scenes of conspicuous consumption; in the trolleys and the baskets heaped high with foodstuffs, and the children greedy-eyed as they approached the confectionery, and tearful if denied it, and the wives weighing up the merits of a leg of mutton while their husbands watched the girls on the staff with eyes no less calculating.

She purchased twice as much food for the weekend as she would normally have done in a full week, her appetite driven to distraction by the smells from the delicatessen and fresh meat counters. By the time she reached the house she was almost shaking with the anticipation of sustenance. As she put the bags down on the front step and fumbled for her keys she heard a car door slam behind her.

"Elaine?"

It was Hermione. The red wine she'd consumed the previous night had left her looking blotchy and stale. "Are you feeling all right?" Elaine asked.

"The point is, are you?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Yes, I'm fine. Why shouldn't I be?"

Hermione returned a harried look. "Sonja's gone down with some kind of food poisoning, and so's Reuben. I just came round to see that you were all right."

"As I say, fine."

"I don't understand it."

"What about Nellwyn and Dick?"

"I couldn't get an answer at their place. But Reuben's in a bad way. They've taken him into hospital for tests." "Do you want to come in and have a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks, I've got to get back to see Sonja. I just didn't like to think of your being on your own if you'd gone down with it too."

Elaine smiled. "You're an angel," she said, and kissed Hermione on the cheek. The gesture seemed to startle the other woman. For some reason she stepped back, the kiss exchanged, staring at Elaine with a vague puzzlement in her eyes.

"I must… I must go," she said, fixing her face as though it would betray her.

I'll call you later in the day," Elaine said, “and find out how they're doing."

"Fine."

Hermione turned away and crossed the pavement to her car. Though she made a cursory attempt to conceal the gesture, Elaine caught sight of her putting her fingers to the spot on her cheek where she had been kissed and scratching at it, as if to eradicate the contact.

It was not the season for flies, but those that had survived the recent cold buzzed around in the kitchen as Elaine selected some bread, smoked ham, and garlic sausage from her purchases, and sat down to eat. She was ravenous. In five minutes or less she had devoured the meats, and made substantial inroads into the loaf, and her hunger was scarcely tamed. Settling to a dessert of figs and cheese, she thought of the paltry omelette she'd been unable to finish that day after the visit to the hospital. One thought led to another; from omelette to smoke to the square to Kavanagh to her most recent visit to the church, and thinking of the place she was suddenly seized by an enthusiasm to see it one final time before it was entirely leveled. She was probably too late already. The bodies would have been parceled up and removed, the crypt decontaminated and scoured; the walls would be rubble. But she knew she would not be satisfied until she had seen it for herself.

Even after a meal which would have sickened her with its excess a few days before, she felt light-headed as she set out for All Saints; almost as though she were drunk. Not the maudlin drunkenness she had been prone to when with Mitch, but a euphoria which made her feel well-nigh invulnerable, as if she had at last located some bright and incorruptible part of herself, and no harm would ever befall her again.

She had prepared herself for finding All Saints in ruins, but she did not. The building still stood, its walls untouched, its beams still dividing the sky. Perhaps it too could not be toppled, she mused; perhaps she and it were twin immortals. The suspicion was reinforced

by the gaggle of fresh worshippers the church had attracted. The police guard had trebled since the day she'd been here, and the tarpaulin that had shielded the crypt entrance from sight was now a vast tent, supported by scaffolding, which entirely encompassed the flank of the building. The altar-servers, standing in close proximity to the tent, wore masks and gloves; the high priests – the chosen few who were actually allowed into the Holy of Holies – were entirely garbed in protective suits.

She watched from the cordon: the signs and genuflections between the devotees; the sluicing down of the suited men as they emerged from behind the veil; the fine spray of fumigants which filled the air like bitter incense. Another onlooker was quizzing one of the officers.

"Why the suits?"

"In case it's contagious," the reply came.

"After all these years?"

"They don't know what they've got in there."

"Diseases don't last, do they?"

"It's a plague-pit," the officer said. "They're just being cautious."

Elaine listened to the exchange, and her tongue itched to speak. She could save them their investigations with a few words. After all, she was living proof that whatever pestilence had destroyed the families in the crypt it was no longer virulent. She had breathed that air, she had touched that moldy flesh, and she felt healthier now than she had in years. But they would not thank her for her revelations, would they? They were too engrossed in their rituals; perhaps even excited by the discovery of such horrors, their turmoil fuelled and fired by the possibility that this death was still living. She would not be so unsporting as to sour their enthusiasm with a confession of her own rare good health.

Instead she turned her back on the priests and their rites, on the drizzle of incense in the air, and began to walk away from the square. As she looked up from her thoughts she glimpsed a familiar figure watching her from the corner of the adjacent street. He turned away as she glanced up, but it was undoubtedly Kavanagh. She called to him, and went to the corner, but he was walking smartly away from her, head bowed. Again she called after him, and now he turned – a patently false look of surprise pasted onto his face – and retrod his

escape-route to greet her. "Have you heard what they've found?" she asked him.

"Oh yes," he replied. Despite the familiarity they'd last enjoyed she was reminded now of her first impression of him: that he was not a man much conversant with feeling.

"Now you'll never get your stones," she said.

"I suppose not," he replied, not overtly concerned at the loss.

She wanted to tell him that she'd seen the plague-pit with her own eyes, hoping the news would bring a gleam to his face, but the corner of this sunlit street was an inappropriate spot for such talk. Besides, it was almost as if he knew. He looked at her so oddly, the warmth of their previous meeting entirely gone.

"Why did you come back?" he asked her.

"Just to see," she replied.

"I'm flattered."

"Flattered?"

That my enthusiasm for mausoleums is infectious."

Still he watched her, and she, returning his look, was conscious of how cold his eyes were, and how perfectly shiny. They might have been glass, she thought; and his skin suede-glued like a hood over the subtle architecture of his skull.

"I should go," she said.

"Business or pleasure?"

"Neither," she told him. "One or two of my friends are ill."

"Ah."

She had the impression that he wanted to be away; that it was only fear of foolishness that kept him from running from her.

"Perhaps I'll see you again," she said. "Sometime."

"I'm sure," he replied, gratefully taking his cue and retreating along the street. "And to your friends – my best regards."

Even if she wanted to pass Kavanagh's good wishes along to Reuben and Sonja, she could not have done so. Hermione did not answer the telephone, nor did any of the others. The closest she came was to leave a message with Reuben's answering service.

The light-headedness she'd felt earlier in the day developed into a strange dreaminess as the afternoon inched towards evening. She ate again, but the feast did nothing to keep the fugue-state from deepening. She felt quite well; that sense of inviolability that had came upon her was still intact. But time and again as the day wore on she found herself standing on the threshold of a room not knowing why she had come there; or watching the light dwindle in the street outside without being quite certain if she was the viewer or the thing viewed. She was happy with her company though, as the flies were happy. They kept buzzing attendance even though the dark fell. About seven in the evening she heard a car draw up outside, and the bell rang. She went to the door of her flat, but couldn't muster the inquisitiveness to open it, step out into the hallway and admit callers. It would be Hermione again, most probably, and she didn't have any appetite for gloomy talk. Didn't want anybody's company in fact, but that of the flies.

The callers insisted on the bell; the more they insisted the more determined she became not to reply. She slid down the wall beside the flat door and listened to the muted debate that now began on the step. It wasn't Hermione; it was nobody she recognized. Now they systematically rang the bells of the flats above, until Mr. Prudhoe came down from the top flat, talking to himself as he went, and opened the door to them. Of the conversation that followed she caught sufficient only to grasp the urgency of their mission, but her disheveled mind hadn't the persistence to attend to the details. They persuaded Prudhoe to allow them into the hallway. They approached the door of her flat and rapped upon it, calling her name. She didn't reply. They rapped again, exchanging words of frustration. She wondered if they could hear her smiling in the darkness. At last – after a further exchange with Prudhoe – they left her to herself.

She didn't know how long she sat on her haunches beside the door, but when she stood up again her lower limbs were entirely numb, and she was hungry. She ate voraciously, more or less finishing off all the purchases of that morning. The flies seemed to have procreated in the intervening hours; they crawled on the table and picked at her slops. She let them eat. They too had their lives to live.

Finally she decided to take some air. No sooner had she stepped out

of her flat, however, than the vigilant Prudhoe was at the top of the stairs, and calling down to her.

"Miss Rider. Wait a moment. I have a message for you."

She contemplated closing the door on him, but she knew he would not rest until he had delivered his communiquй. He hurried down the stairs – a Cassandra in shabby slippers.

"There were policemen here," he announced before he had even reached the bottom step, “they were looking for you."

"Oh," she said. "Did they say what they wanted?"

To talk to you. Urgently. Two of your friends -”

"What about them?"

"They died," he said. "This afternoon. They have some kind of disease."

He had a sheet of notepaper in his hand. This he now passed over to her, relinquishing his hold an instant before she took it.

They left that number for you to call," he said.

"You've to contact them as soon as possible." His message delivered, he was already retiring up the stairs again. Elaine looked down at the sheet of paper, with its scrawled figures. By the time she'd read the seven digits, Prudhoe had disappeared.

She went back into the flat. For some reason she wasn't thinking of Reuben or Sonja – who, it seemed, she would not see again – but of the sailor, Maybury, who'd seen Death and escaped it only to have it follow him like a loyal dog, waiting its moment to leap and lick his face. She sat beside the phone and stared at the numbers on the sheet, and then at the fingers that held the sheet and at the hands that held the fingers. Was the touch that hung so innocently at the end of her arms now lethal? Was that what the detectives had come to tell her? That her friends were dead by her good offices? If so, how many others had she brushed against and breathed upon in the days since her pestilential education at the crypt? In the street, in the bus, in the supermarket: at work, at play. She thought of Bernice, lying on the toilet floor, and of Hermione, rubbing the spot where she had been kissed as if knowing some scourge had been passed along to her. And suddenly she knew, knew in her marrow, that her pursuers were right

in their suspicions, and that all these dreamy days she had been nurturing a fatal child. Hence her hunger; hence the glow of fulfillment she felt.

She put down the note and sat in the semi-darkness, trying to work out precisely the plague's location. Was it her fingertips; in her belly; in her eyes? None, and yet all of these. Her first assumption had been wrong. It wasn't a child at all: she didn't carry it in some particular cell. It was everywhere. She and it were synonymous. That being so, there could be no slicing out of the offending part, as they had sliced out her tumours and all that had been devoured by them. Not that she would escape their attentions for that fact. They had come looking for her, hadn't they, to take her back into the custody of sterile rooms, to deprive her of her opinions and dignity, to make her fit only for their loveless investigations. The thought revolted her; she would rather die as the chestnut-haired woman in the crypt had died, sprawled in agonies, than submit to them again. She tore up the sheet of paper and let the litter drop. It was too late for solutions anyway. The removal men had opened the door and found Death waiting on the other side, eager for daylight. She was its agent, and it – in its wisdom – had granted her immunity; had given her strength and a dreamy rapture; had taken her fear away. She, in return, had spread its word, and there was no undoing those labours: not now. All the dozens, maybe hundreds, of people whom she'd contaminated in the last few days would have gone back to their families and friends, to their work places and their places of recreation, and spread the word yet further. They would have passed its fatal promise to their children as they tucked them into bed, and to their mates in the act of love. Priests had no doubt given it with Communion; shopkeepers with change of a five-pound note.

While she was thinking of this – of the disease spreading like fire in tinder – the doorbell rang again. They had come back for her. And, as before, they were ringing the other bells in the house. She could hear Prudhoe coming downstairs. This time he would know she was in. He would tell them so. They would hammer at the door, and when she refused to answer As Prudhoe opened the front door she unlocked the back. As she slipped into the yard she heard voices at the flat door, and then their rapping and their demands. She unbolted the yard gate and fled into the darkness of the alleyway. She already out of hearing range by the time they had beaten down the door.

She wanted most of all to go back to All Saints, but she knew that such a tactic would only invite arrest. They would expect her to follow that route, counting upon her adherence to the first cause. But she

wanted to see Death's face again, now more than ever. To speak with it. To debate its strategies. Their strategies. To ask why it had chosen her. She emerged from the alley-way and watched the goings-on at the front of the house from the corner of the street. This time there were more than two men; she counted four at least, moving in and out of the house. What were they doing? Peeking through her underwear and her love-letters, most probably, examining the sheets on her bed for stray hairs, and the mirror for traces of her reflection. But even if they turned the flat upside-down, if they examined every print and pronoun, they wouldn't find the clues they sought. Let them search. The lover had escaped. Only her tear stains remained, and flies at the light bulb to sing her praises.

The night was starry, but as she walked down to the centre of the city the brightness of the Christmas illuminations festooning trees and buildings cancelled out their light. Most of the stores were well closed by this hour, but a good number of window-shoppers still idled along the pavements. She soon tired of the displays however, of the baubles and the dummies, and made her way off the main road and into the side streets. It was darker here, which suited her abstracted state of mind. The sound of music and laughter escaped through open bar doors; an argument erupted in an upstairs gaming-room: blows were exchanged; in one doorway two lovers defied discretion; in another, a man pissed with the gusto of a horse.

It was only now, in the relative hush of these backwaters, that she realised she was not alone. Footsteps followed her, keeping a cautious distance, but never straying far. Had the trackers followed her? Were they hemming her in even now, preparing to snatch her into their closed order? If so, flight would only delay the inevitable. Better to confront them now, and dare them to come within range of her pollution. She slid into hiding, and listened as the footsteps approached, then stepped into view.

It was not the law, but Kavanagh. Her initial shock was almost immediately superseded by a sudden comprehension of why he had pursued her. She studied him. His skin was pulled so tight over his skull she could see the bone gleam in the dismal light. How, her whirling thoughts demanded, had she not recognised him sooner? Not realised at that first meeting, when he'd talked of the dead and their glamour, that he spoke as their Maker?

"I followed you," he said.

"All the way from the house?"

He nodded.

"What did they tell you?" he asked her. "The policemen. What did they say?"

"Nothing I hadn't already guessed," she replied.

"You knew?"

"In a manner of speaking. I must have done, in my heart of hearts. Remember our first conversation?" He murmured that he did.

"All you said about Death. Such egotism."

He grinned suddenly, showing more bone.

"Yes," he said. "What must you think of me?"

"It made a kind of sense to me, even then. I didn't know why at the time. Didn't know what the future would bring -" "What does it bring?" he inquired of her softly.

She shrugged. "Death's been waiting for me all this time, am I right?"

"Oh yes," he said, pleased by her understanding of the situation between them. He took a step towards her, and reached to touch her face.

"You are remarkable," he said.

"Not really."

"But to be so unmoved by it all. So cold."

"What's to be afraid of?" she said. He stroked her cheek. She almost expected his hood of skin to come unbuttoned then, and the marbles that played in his sockets to tumble out and smash. But he kept his disguise intact, for appearance's sake.

"I want you," he told her.

"Yes," she said. Of course he did. It had been in his every word from the beginning, but she hadn't had the wit to comprehend it. Every love story was – at the last – a story of death; this was what the poets insisted. Why should it be any less true the other way about?

They could not go back to his house; the officers would be there too, he told her, for they must know of the romance between them. Nor, of course, could they return to her flat. So they found a small hotel in the vicinity and took a room there. Even in the dingy lift he took the liberty of stroking her hair, and then, finding her compliant, put his hand upon her breast. The room was sparsely furnished, but was lent some measure of charm by a splash of coloured lights from a Christmas tree in the street below. Her lover didn't take his eyes off her for a single moment, as if even now he expected her to turn tail and run at the merest flaw in his behaviour. He needn't have concerned himself; his treatment of her left little cause for complaint. His kisses were insistent but not overpowering; his undressing of her except for the fumbling (a nice human touch, she thought) – was a model of finesse and sweet solemnity. She was surprised that he had not known about her scar, only because she had become to believe this intimacy had begun on the operating table, when twice she had gone into his arms, and twice been denied them by the surgeon's bullying. But perhaps, being no sentimentalist, he had forgotten that first meeting. Whatever the reason, he looked to be upset when he slipped off her dress, and there was a trembling interval when she thought he would reject her. But the moment passed, and now he reached down to her abdomen and ran his fingers along the scar.

"It's beautiful," he said.

She was happy.

"I almost died under the anesthetic," she told him.

That would have been a waste," he said, reaching up her body and working at her breast. It seemed to arouse him, for his voice was more guttural when next he spoke. "What did they tell you?" he asked her, moving his hands up the soft channel behind her clavicle, and stroking her there. She had not been touched in months, except by disinfected hands; his delicacy woke shivers in her. She was so engrossed in pleasure that she failed to reply to his question. He asked again as he moved between her legs.

"What did they tell you?"

Through a haze of anticipation she said: "They left a number for me to ring. So that I could be helped…" "But you didn't want help?"

"No," she breathed. "Why should I?"

She half-saw his smile, though her eyes wanted to flicker closed

entirely. His appearance failed to stir any passion in her; indeed there was much about his disguise (that absurd bow-tie, for one) which she thought ridiculous. With her eyes closed, however, she could forget such petty details; she could strip the hood off and imagine him pure. When she thought of him that way her mind pirouetted.

He took his hands from her; she opened her eyes. He was fumbling with his belt. As he did so somebody shouted in the street outside. His head jerked in the direction of the window; his body tensed. She was surprised at his sudden concern.

"It's all right," she said.

He leaned forward and put his hand to her throat.

"Be quiet," he instructed.

She looked up into his face. He had begun to sweat. The exchanges in the street went on for a few minutes longer; it was simply two late-night gamblers parting. He realized his error now.

"I thought I heard -”

"What?"

"- I thought I heard them calling my name."

"W ho would do that?" she inquired fondly. "Nobody knows we're here."

He looked away from the window. All purposefulness had abruptly drained from him; after the instant of fear his features had slackened. He looked almost stupid.

They came close," he said. "But they never found me."

"Close?"

"Coming to you." He laid his head on her breasts. "So very close," he murmured. She could hear her pulse in her head. "But I'm swift," he said, “and invisible." His hand strayed back down to her scar, and further. "And always neat," he added.

She sighed as he stroked her.

They admire me for that, I'm sure. Don't you think they must admire me? For being so neat?"

She remembered the chaos of the crypt; its indignities, its disorders.

"Not always…" she said.

He stopped stroking her.

"Oh yes," he said. "Oh yes. I never spill blood. That's a rule of mine. Never spill blood."

She smiled at his boasts. She would tell him now – though surely he already knew – about her visit to All Saints, and the handiwork of his that she'd seen there.

"Sometimes you can't help blood being spilt," she said, "I don't hold it against you."

At these words, he began to tremble.

"What did they tell you about me? What lies'?"

"Nothing," she said, mystified by his response. "What could they know?"

"I'm a professional," he said to her, his hand moving back up to her face. She felt intentionality in him again. A seriousness in his weight as he pressed closer upon her.

"I won't have them lie about me," he said. "I won't have it."

He lifted his head from her chest and looked at her.

"All I do is stop the drummer," he said.

"The drummer?"

"I have to stop him cleanly. In his tracks."

The wash of colours from the lights below painted his face one moment red, the next green, the next yellow; unadulterated hues, as in a child's paint-box.

"I won't have them tell lies about me," he said again. "To say I spill blood."

"They told me nothing," she assured him. He had given up his pillow entirely, and now moved to straddle her. His hands were done with tender touches.

"Shall I show you how clean I am?" he said: "How easily I stop the drummer?"

Before she could reply, his hands closed around her neck. She had no time even to gasp, let alone shout. His thumbs were expert; they found her windpipe and pressed. She heard the drummer quicken its rhythm in her ears. "It's quick; and clean," he was telling her, the colours still coming in predictable sequence. Red, yellow, green; red, yellow, green.

There was an error here, she knew; a terrible misunderstanding which she couldn't quite fathom. She struggled to make some sense of it.

"I don't understand," she tried to tell him, but her bruised larynx could produce no more than a gargling sound. Too late for excuses," he said, shaking his head. "You came to me, remember? You want the drummer stopped. Why else did you come?" His grip tightened yet further. She had the sensation of her face swelling; of the blood throbbing to jump from her eyes. "Don't you see that they came to warn you about me?" frowning as he laboured. "They came to seduce you away from me by telling you I spilt blood."

"No," she squeezed the syllable out on her last breath, but he only pressed harder to cancel her denial. The drummer was deafeningly loud now; though Kavanagh's mouth still opened and closed she could no longer hear what he was telling her. It mattered little. She realised now that he was not Death; not the clean-boned guardian she'd waited for. In her eagerness, she had given herself into the hands of a common killer, a street-corner Cain. She wanted to spit contempt at him, but her consciousness was slipping, the room, the lights, the face all throbbing to the drummer's beat. And then it all stopped.

She looked down on the bed. Her body lay sprawled across it. One desperate hand had clutched at the sheet, and clutched still, though there was no life left in it. Her tongue protruded, there was spittle on her blue lips. But (as he had promised) there was no blood.

She hovered, her presence failing even to bring a breeze to the cobwebs in this corner of the ceiling, and watched while Kavanagh observed the rituals of hi«crime. He was bending over the body, whispering in its ear as he rearranged it on the tangled sheets. Then he unbuttoned himself and unveiled that bone whose inflammation was the sincerest form of flattery. What followed was comical in its gracelessness; as her body was comical, with its scars and its places

where age puckered and plucked at it. She watched his ungainly attempts at congress quite remotely. His buttocks were pale, and imprinted with the marks his underwear had left; their motion put her in mind of a mechanical toy.

He kissed her as he worked, and swallowed the pestilence with her spittle; his hands came off her body gritty with her contagious cells. He knew none of this, of course. He was perfectly innocent of what corruption he embraced, and took into himself with every uninspired thrust.

At last, he finished. There was no gasp, no cry. He simply stopped his clockwork motion and climbed off her, wiping himself with the edge of the sheet, and buttoning himself up again.

Guides were calling her. She had journeys to make, reunions to look forward to. But she did not want to go; at least not yet. She steered the vehicle of her spirit to a fresh vantage-point, where she could better see Kavanagh's face. Her sight, or whatever sense this condition granted her, saw clearly how his features were painted over a groundwork of muscle, and how, beneath that intricate scheme, the bones sheened. Ah, the bone. He was not Death of course; and yet he was. He had the face, hadn't he? And one day, given decay's blessing, he'd show it. Such a pity that a scraping of flesh came between it and the naked eye.

Come away, the voices insisted. She knew they could not be fobbed off very much longer. Indeed there were some amongst them she thought she knew. A moment, she pleaded, only a moment more.

Kavanagh had finished his business at the murder- scene. He checked his appearance in the wardrobe mirror, then went to the door. She went with him, intrigued by the utter banality of his expression. He slipped out onto the silent landing and then down the stairs, waiting for a moment when the night-porter was otherwise engaged before stepping out into the street, and liberty.

Was it dawn that washed the sky, or the illuminations? Perhaps she had watched him from the corner of the room longer than she'd thought – hours passing as moments in the state she had so recently achieved. Only at the last was she rewarded for her vigil, as a look she recognised crossed Kavanagh's face. Hunger! The man was hungry. He would not die of the plague, any more than she had. Its presence shone in him – gave a fresh luster to his skin, and a new insistence to his belly.

He had come to her a minor murderer, and was going from her as Death writ large. She laughed, seeing the self-fulfilling prophecy she had unwittingly engineered. For an instant his pace slowed, as if he might have heard her. But no; it was the drummer he was listening for, beating louder than ever in his ear and demanding, as he went, a new and deadly vigour in his every step.

XXVIII: HOW SPOILERS BLEED

Locke raised his eyes to the trees. The wind was moving in them, and the commotion of their laden branches sounded like the river in full spate. One impersonation of many. When he had first come to the jungle he had been awed by the sheer multiplicity of beast and blossom, the relentless parade of life here. But he had learned better. This burgeoning diversity was a sham; the jungle pretending itself an artless garden. It was not. Where the untutored trespasser saw only a brilliant show of natural splendours, Locke now recognised a subtle conspiracy at work, in which each thing mirrored some other thing. The trees, the river; a blossom, a bird. In a moth's wing, a monkey's eye; on a lizard's back, sunlight on stones. Round and round in a dizzying circle of impersonations, a hall of mirrors which confounded the senses and would, given time, rot reason altogether. See us now, he thought drunkenly as they stood around Cherrick's grave, look at how we play the game too. We're living; but we impersonate the dead better than the dead themselves.

The corpse had been one scab by the time they'd hoisted it into a sack and carried it outside to this miserable plot behind Tetelman's house to bury. There were half a dozen other graves here. All Europeans, to judge by the names crudely burned into the wooden crosses; killed by snakes, or heat, or longing. Tetelman attempted to say a brief prayer in Spanish, but the roar of the trees, and the din of birds making their way home to their roosts before night came down, all but drowned him out. He gave up eventually, and they made their way back into the cooler interior of the house, where Stumpf was sitting, drinking brandy and staring inanely at the darkening stain on the floorboards.

Outside, two of Tetelman's tamed Indians were shoveling the rank jungle earth on top of Cherrick's sack, eager to be done with the work and away before nightfall. Locke watched from the window. The gravediggers didn't talk as they laboured, but filled the shallow grave up, then flattened the earth as best they could with the leather-tough soles of their feet. As they did so the stamping of the ground took on a rhythm. It occurred to Locke that the men were probably the worse for bad whisky; he knew few Indians who didn't drink like fishes. Now, staggering a little, they began to dance on Cherrick's grave.

"Locke?"

Locke woke. In the darkness, a cigarette glowed. As the smoker drew on it, and the tip burned more intensely, Stumpf s wasted features swam up out of the night.

"Locke? Are you awake?"

"What do you want?"

"I can't sleep," the mask replied, "I've been thinking. The supply plane comes in from Santarem the day after tomorrow. We could be back there in a few hours. Out of all this."

"Sure."

"I mean permanently," Stumpf said. "Away."

"Permanently?"

Stumpf lit another cigarette from the embers of his last before saying, "I don't believe in curses. Don't think I do." "Who said anything about curses?"

"You saw Cherrick's body. What happened to him…"

"There's a disease," said Locke, “what's it called? – when the blood doesn't set properly?"

"Haemophilia," Stumpf replied. "He didn't have haemophilia and we both know it. I've seen him scratched and cut dozens of times. He mended like you or I."

Locke snatched at a mosquito that had alighted on his chest and ground it out between thumb and forefinger. "All right. Then what killed him?"

"You saw the wounds better than I did, but it seemed to me his skin just broke open as soon as he was touched." Locke nodded. "That's the way it looked."

"Maybe it's something he caught off the Indians."

Locke took the point."I didn't touch any of them," he said.

"Neither did I. But he did, remember?"

Locke remembered; scenes like that weren't easy to forget, try as he might. "Christ," he said, his voice hushed. "What a fucking situation."

"I'm going back to Santarem. I don't want them coming looking for me."

"They're not going to."

"How do you know? We screwed up back there. We could have bribed them. Got them off the land some other way."

"I doubt it. You heard what Tetelman said. Ancestral territories."

"You can have my share of the land," Stumpf said, "I want no part of it."

"You mean it then? You're getting out?"

"I feel dirty. We're spoilers, Locke."

"It's your funeral."

"I mean it. I'm not like you. Never really had the stomach for this kind of thing. Will you buy my third off me?" "Depends on your price."

"Whatever you want to give. It's yours."

Confessional over, Stumpf returned to his bed, and lay down in the darkness to finish off his cigarette. It would soon be light. Another jungle dawn: a precious interval, all too short, before the world began to sweat. How he hated the place. At least he hadn't touched any of the Indians; hadn't even been within breathing distance of them. Whatever infection they'd passed on to Cherrick he could surely not be tainted. In less than forty-eight hours he would be away to Santarem, and then on to some city, any city, where the tribe could never follow. He'd already done his penance, hadn't he? Paid for his greed and his arrogance with the rot in his abdomen and the terrors he knew he would never quite shake off again. Let that be punishment enough, he prayed, and slipped, before the monkeys began to call up the day, into a spoiler's sleep.

A gem-backed beetle, trapped beneath Stumpf's mosquito net, hummed around in diminishing circles, looking for some way out. It could find none. Eventually, exhausted by the search, it hovered over the sleeping man, then landed on his forehead. There it wandered, drinking at the pores. Beneath its imperceptible tread, Stumpf s skin opened and broke into a trail of tiny wounds.

They had come into the Indian hamlet at noon; the sun a basilisk's

eye. At first they had thought the place deserted. Locke and Cherrick had advanced into the compound, leaving the dysentery-ridden Stumpf in the jeep, out of the worst of the heat. It was Cherrick who first noticed the child. A pot-bellied boy of perhaps four or five, his face painted with thick bands of the scarlet vegetable dye urucu, had slipped out from his hiding place and come to peer at the trespassers, fearless in his curiosity. Cherrick stood still; Locke did the same. One by one, from the huts and from the shelter of the trees around the compound, the tribe appeared and stared, like the boy, at the newcomers. If there was a flicker of feeling on their broad, flat-nosed faces, Locke could not read it. These people – he thought of every Indian as part of one wretched tribe – were impossible to decipher; deceit was their only skill. "What are you doing here?" he said. The sun was baking the back of his neck. "T his is our land." The boy still looked up at him. His almond eyes refused to fear.

"They don't understand you," Cherrick said.

"Get the Kraut out here. Let him explain it to them."

"He can't move."

"Get him out here," Locke said. "I don't care if he's shat his pants."

Cherrick backed away down the track, leaving Locke standing in the ring of huts. He looked from doorway to doorway, from tree to tree, trying to estimate the numbers. There were at most three dozen Indians, two- thirds of them women and children; descendants of the great peoples that had once roamed the Amazon Basin in their tens of thousands. Now those tribes were all but decimated. The forest in which they had prospered for generations was being leveled and burned; eight-lane highways were speeding through their hunting grounds. All they held sacred the wilderness and their place in its system – was being trampled and trespassed: they were exiles in their own land. But still they declined to pay homage to their new masters, despite the rifles they brought. Only death would convince them of defeat, Locke mused.

Cherrick found Stumpf slumped in the front seat of the jeep, his pasty features more wretched than ever. "Locke wants you," he said, shaking the German out of his doze. "The village is still occupied. You'll have to speak to them."

Stumpf groaned. "I can't move," he said, I'm dying-”

"Locke wants you dead or alive," Cherrick said. Their fear of Locke,

which went unspoken, was perhaps one of the two things they had in common; that and greed.

"I feel awful," Stumpf said.

"If I don't bring you, he'll only come himself," Cherrick pointed out. This was indisputable.

Stumpf threw the other man a despairing glance, then nodded his jowly head. "All right," he said, “help me." Cherrick had no wish to lay a hand on Stumpf. The man stank of his sickness; he seemed to be oozing the contents of his gut through his pores; his skin had the luster of rank meat. He took the outstretched hand nevertheless. Without aid, Stump would never make the hundred yards from jeep to compound.

Ahead, Locke was shouting.

"Get moving," said Cherrick, hauling Stumpf down from the front seat and towards the bawling voice. "Let's get it over and done with."

When the two men returned into the circle of huts the scene had scarcely changed. Locke glanced around at Stumpf. "We got trespassers," he said.

"So I see," Stumpf returned wearily.

"Tell them to get the fuck off our land," Locke said. "Tell them this is our territory: we bought it. Without sitting tenants."

Stumpf nodded, not meeting Locke's rabid eyes. Sometimes he hated the man almost as much as he hated himself. "Go on…" Locke said, and gestured for Cherrick to relinquish his support of Stumpf. This he did. The German stumbled forward, head bowed. He took several seconds to work out his patter, then raised his head and spoke a few wilting words in bad Portuguese. The pronouncement was met with the same blank looks as Locke's performance. Stumpf tried again, re-arranging his inadequate vocabulary to try and awake a flicker of understanding amongst these savages.

The boy who had been so entertained by Locke's cavortings now stood staring up at this third demon, his face wiped of smiles. This one was nowhere near as comical as the first. He was sick and haggard; he smelt of death. The boy held his nose to keep from inhaling the badness off the man.

Stumpf peered through greasy eyes at his audience. If they did understand, and were faking their blank incomprehension, it was a flawless performance. His limited skills defeated, he turned giddily to Locke. They don't understand me," he said.

Tell them again."

"I don't think they speak Portuguese."

Tell them anyway."

Cherrick cocked his rifle. "We don't have to talk with them," he said under his breath. They're on our land. We're within our rights -"

"No," said Locke. There's no need for shoo ting. Not if we can persuade them to go peacefully." They don't understand plain common sense," Cher rick said. "Look at them. They're animals. Living in filth." Stumpf had begun to try and communicate again, this time accompanying his hesitant words with a pitiful mime. "Tell them we've got work to do here," Locke prompted him.

"I'm trying my best," Stumpf replied testily.

"We've got papers."

"I don't think they'd be much impressed," Stumpf returned, with a cautious sarcasm that was lost on the other man. "Just tell them to move on. Find some other piece of land to squat on."

Watching Stumpf put these sentiments into word and sign-language, Locke was already running through the alternative options available. Either the Indians – the Txukahamei or the Achual or whatever damn family it was accepted their demands and moved on, or else they would have to enforce the edict. As Cherrick had said, they were within their rights. They had papers from the development authorities; they had maps marking the division between one territory and the next; they had every sanction from signature to bullet. He had no active desire to shed blood. The world was still too full of bleeding heart liberals and doe-eyed sentimentalists to make genocide the most convenient solution. But the gun had been used before, and would be used again, until every unwashed Indian had put on a pair of trousers and given up eating monkeys.

Indeed, the din of liberals notwithstanding, the gun had its appeal. It was swift, and absolute. Once it had had its short, sharp say there was no danger of further debate; no chance that in ten years' time

some mercenary Indian who'd found a copy of Marx in the gutter could come back claiming his tribal lands – oil, minerals and all. Once gone, they were gone forever.

At the thought of these scarlet-faced savages laid low, Locke felt his trigger-finger itch; physically itch. Stumpf had finished his encore; it had met with no response. Now he groaned, and turned to Locke.

I'm going to be sick," he said. His face was bright white; the glamour of his skin made his small teeth look dingy. "Be my guest," Locke replied.

"Please. I have to lie down. I don't want them watching me."

Locke shook his head. "You don't move 'til they listen. If we don't get any joy from them, you're going to see something to be sick about." Locke toyed with the stock of his rifle as he spoke, running a broken thumb-nail along the nicks in it. There were perhaps a dozen; each one a human grave. The jungle concealed murder so easily; it almost seemed, in its cryptic fashion, to condone the crime.

Stumpf turned away from Locke and scanned the mute assembly. There were so many Indians here, he thought, and though he carried a pistol he was an inept marksman. Suppose they rushed Locke, Cherrick and himself? He would not survive. And yet, looking at the Indians, he could see no sign of aggression amongst them. Once they had been warriors; now? Like beaten children, sullen and willfully stupid. There was some trace of beauty in one or two of the younger women; their skins, though grimy, were fine, their eyes black. Had he felt more healthy he might have been aroused by their nakedness, tempted to press his hands upon their shiny bodies. As it was their feigned incomprehension merely irritated him. They seemed, in their silence, like another species, as mysterious and unfathomable as mules or birds. Hadn't somebody in Uxituba told him that many of these people didn't even give their children proper names? That each was like a limb of the tribe, anonymous and therefore unfixable? He could believe that now, meeting the same dark stare in each pair of eyes; could believe that what they faced here was not three dozen individuals but a fluid system of hatred made flesh. It made him shudder to think of it. Now, for the first time since their appearance, one of the assembly moved. He was an ancient; fully thirty years older than most of the tribe. He, like the rest, was all but naked. The sagging flesh of his limbs and breasts resembled tanned hide; his step, though the pale eyes suggested blindness, was perfectly confident. Once standing in front of the interlopers he opened his mouth – there

were no teeth set in his rotted gums – and spoke. What emerged from his scraggy throat was not a language made of words, but only of sound; a potpourri of jungle noises. There was no discernible pattern to the outpouring, it was simply a display – awesome in its way – of impersonations. The man could murmur like a jaguar, screech like a parrot; he could find in his throat the splash of rain on orchids; the howl of monkeys. The sounds made Stumpf s gorge rise. The jungle had diseased him, dehydrated him and left him wrung out. Now this rheumy-eyed stick-man was vomiting the whole odious place up at him. The raw heat in the circle of huts made Stumpf s head beat, and he was sure, as he stood listening to the sage's din, that the old man was measuring the rhythm of his nonsense to the thud at his temples and wrists.

"What's he saying?" Locke demanded.

"What does it sound like?" Stumpf replied, irritated by Locke's idiot questions. "It's all noises." "The fucker's cursing us," Cherrick said.

Stumpf looked round at the third man. Cherrick's eyes were starting from his head.

"It's a curse," he said to Stumpf.

Locke laughed, unmoved by Cherrick's apprehension. He pushed Stumpf out of the way so as to face the old man, whose song-speech had now lowered in pitch; it was almost lilting. He was singing twilight, Stumpf thought: that brief ambiguity between the fierce day and the suffocating night. Yes, that was it. He could hear in the song the purr and the coo of a drowsy kingdom. It was so persuasive he wanted to lie down on the spot where he stood, and sleep. Locke broke the spell. "What are you saying?" he spat in the tribesman's crazy face. "Talk sense!" But the night-noises only whispered on, an unbroken stream.

"This is our village," another voice now broke in; the man spoke as if translating the elder's words. Locke snapped round to locate the speaker. He was a thin youth, whose skin might once have been golden. "Our village. Our land." "You speak English," Locke said.

"Some," the youth replied.

"Why didn't you answer me earlier?" Locke demanded, his fury exacerbated by the disinterest on the Indian's face. "Not my place to speak," the man replied. "He is the elder."

"The Chief, you mean?"

"The Chief is dead. All his family is dead. This is the wisest of us -"

"Then you tell him -"

"No need to tell," the young man broke in. "H e under stands you."

"He speaks English too?"

"No," the other replied, "but he understands you. You are… transparent."

Locke half-grasped that the youth was implying an insult here, but wasn't quite certain. He gave Stumpf a puzzled look. The German shook his head. Locke returned his attention to the youth. "Tell him anyway," he said, "tell all of them. This is our land. We bought it."

"The tribe has always lived here," the reply came.

"Not any longer," Cherrick said.

"We've got papers -" Stumpf said mildly, still hoping that the confrontation might end peacefully,"- from the government."

"We were here before the government," the tribesman replied.

The old man had stopped talking the forest. Perhaps, Stumpf thought, he's coming to the beginning of another day, and stopped. He was turning away now, indifferent to the presence of these unwelcome guests. "Call him back," Locke demanded, stabbing his rifle towards the young tribesman. The gesture was unambiguous. "Make him tell the rest of them they've got to go-"

The young man seemed unimpressed by the threat of Locke's rifle, however, and clearly unwilling to give orders to his elder, whatever the imperative. He simply watched the old man walk back towards the hut from which he had emerged. Around the compound, others were also turning away. The old man's withdrawal apparently signaled that the show was over.

"No." said Cherrick, "you're not listening." The colour in his cheeks had risen a tone; his voice, an octave. He pushed forward, rifle raised. "You fucking scum!"

Despite his hysteria, he was rapidly losing his audience. The old man had reached the doorway of his hut, and now bent his back and

disappeared into its recesses; the few members of the tribe who were still showing some interest in proceedings were viewing the Europeans with a hint of pity for their lunacy. It only enraged Cherrick further. "Listen to me!" he shrieked, sweat flicking off his brow as he jerked his head at one retreating figure and then at another. "Listen, you bastards."

"Easy…" said Stumpf.

The appeal triggered Cherrick. Without warning he raised his rifle to his shoulder, aimed at the open door of the hut into which the old man had vanished and fired. Birds rose from the crowns of adjacent trees; dogs took to their heels. From within the hut came a tiny shriek, not like the old man's voice at all. As it sounded, Stumpf fell to his knees, hugging his belly, his gut in spasm. Face to the ground, he did not see the diminutive figure emerge from the hut and totter into the sunlight. Even when he did look up, and saw how the child with the scarlet face clutched his belly, he hoped his eyes lied.

But they did not. It was blood that came from between the child's tiny fingers, and death that had stricken his face. He fell forward on to the impacted earth of the hut's threshold, twitched, and died.

Somewhere amongst the huts a woman began to sob quietly. For a moment the world spun on a pin-head, balanced exquisitely between silence and the cry that must break it, between a truce held and the coming atrocity. "You stupid bastard," Locke murmured to Cherrick. Under his condemnation, his voice trembled. "Back off," he said. "Get up, Stumpf. We're not waiting. Get up and come now, or don't come at all."

Stumpf was still looking at the body of the child. Suppressing his moans, he got to his feet.

"Help me," he said. Locke lent him an arm. "Cover us," he said to Cherrick.

The man nodded, deathly-pale. Some of the tribe had turned their gaze on the Europeans' retreat, their expressions, despite this tragedy, as inscrutable as ever. Only the sobbing woman, presumably the dead child's mother, wove between the silent figures, keening her grief.

Cherrick's rifle shook as he kept the bridgehead. He'd done the mathematics; if it came to a head-on collision they had little chance of survival. But even now, with the enemy making a getaway, there was no sign of movement amongst the Indians. Just the accusing facts: the

dead boy; the warm rifle. Cherrick chanced a look over his shoulder. Locke and Stumpf were already within twenty yards of the jeep, and there was still no move from the savages.

Then, as he looked back towards the compound, it seemed as though the tribe breathed together one solid breath, and hearing that sound Cherrick felt death wedge itself like a fish-bone in his throat, too deep to be plucked out by his fingers, too big to be shat. It was just waiting there, lodged in his anatomy, beyond argument or appeal. He was distracted from its presence by a movement at the door of the hut. Quite ready to make the same mistake again, he took firmer hold of his rifle. The old man had re-appeared at the door. He stepped over the corpse of the boy, which was lying where it had toppled. Again, Cherrick glanced behind him. Surely they were at the jeep? But Stumpf had stumbled; Locke was even now dragging him to his feet. Cherrick, seeing the old man advancing towards him, took one cautious step backwards, followed by another. But the old man was fearless. He walked swiftly across the compound coming to stand so close to Cherrick, his body as vulnerable as ever, that the barrel of the rifle prodded his shrunken belly.

There was blood on both his hands, fresh enough to run down the man's arms when he displayed the palms for Cherrick's benefit. Had he touched the boy, Cherrick wondered, as he stepped out of the hut? If so, it had been an astonishing sleight-of-hand, for Cherrick had seen nothing. Trick or no trick, the significance of the display was perfectly apparent: he was being accused of murder. Cherrick wasn't about to be cowed, however. He stared back at the old man, matching defiance with defiance.

But the old bastard did nothing, except show his bloody palms, his eyes full of tears. Cherrick could feel his anger growing again. He poked the man's flesh with his finger.

"You don't frighten me," he said, “you understand? I'm not a fool."

As he spoke he seemed to see a shifting in the old man's features. It was a trick of the sun, of course, or of bird shadow, but there was, beneath the corruption of age, a hint of the child now dead at the hut door: the tiny mouth even seemed to smile. Then, as subtly as it had appeared, the illusion faded again.

Cherrick withdrew his hand from the old man's chest, narrowing his eyes against further mirages. He then renewed his retreat. He had taken three steps only when something broke cover to his left. He

swung round, raised his rifle and fired. A piebald pig, one of several that had been grazing around the huts, was checked in its flight by the bullet, which struck it in the neck. It seemed to trip over itself, and collapsed headlong in the dust.

Cherrick swung his rifle back towards the old man. But he hadn't moved, except to open his mouth. His palate was making the sound of the dying pig. A choking squeal, pitiful and ridiculous, which followed Cherrick back up the path to the jeep. Locke had the engine running. "Get in," he said. Cherrick needed no encouragement, but flung himself into the front seat. The interior of the vehicle was filthy hot, and stank of Stumpf s bodily functions, but it was as near safety as they'd been in the last hour.

"It was a pig," he said, "I shot a pig."

"I saw," said Locke.

That old bastard He didn't finish. He was looking down at the two fingers with which he had prodded the elder. "I touched him," he muttered, perplexed by what he saw. The fingertips were bloody, though the flesh he had laid his fingers upon had been clean.

Locke ignored Cherrick's confusion and backed the jeep up to turn it around, then drove away from the hamlet, down a track that seemed to have become choked with foliage in the hour since they'd come up it. There was no discernible pursuit.

The tiny trading post to the south of Averio was scant of civilisation, but it sufficed. There were white faces here, and clean water. Stumpf, whose condition had deteriorated on the return journey, was treated by Dancy, an Englishman who had the manner of a disenfranchised earl and a face like hammered steak. He claimed to have been a doctor once upon a sober time, and though he had no evidence of his qualifications nobody contested his right to deal with Stumpf. The German was delirious, and on occasion violent, but Dancy, his small hands heavy with gold rings, seemed to take a positive delight in nursing his thrashing patient. While Stumpf raved beneath his mosquito net, Locke and Cherrick sat in the lamp-lit gloom and drank, then told the story of their encounter with the tribe. It was Tetelman, the owner of the trading post's stores, who had most to say when the report was finished. He knew the Indians well.

"I've been here years," he said, feeding nuts to the mangy monkey that scampered on his lap. "I know the way these people think. They

may act as though they're stupid; cowards even. Take it from me, they're neither." Cherrick grunted. The quicksilver monkey fixed him with vacant eyes. "They didn't make a move on us," Cherrick said, “even though they outnumbered us ten to one. If that isn't cowardice, what is it?"

Tetelman settled back in his creaking chair, throwing the animal off his lap. His face was raddled and used. Only his lips, constantly rewetted from his glass, had any colour; he looked, thought Locke, like an old whore. "Thirty years ago," Tetelman said, “this whole territory was their homeland. Nobody wanted it; they went where they liked, did what they liked. As far as we whites were concerned the jungle was filthy and disease-infected: we wanted no part of it. And, of course, in some ways we were right. It is filthy and disease-infected; but it's also got reserves we now want badly: minerals, oil maybe: power."

"We paid for that land," said Locke, his fingers jittery on the cracked rim of his glass. "It's all we've got now." Tetelman sneered. "Paid?" he said. The monkey chattered at his feet, apparently as amused by this claim as its master. "No. You just paid for a blind eye, so you could take it by force. You paid for the right to fuck up the Indians in any way you could. That's what your dollars bought, Mr. Locke. The government of this country is counting off the months until every tribe on the sub-continent is wiped out by you or your like. It's no use to play the outraged innocents. I've been here too long…"

Cherrick spat on to the bare floor. Tetelman's speech had heated his blood.

"And so why'd you come here, if you're so fucking clever?" he asked the trader.

"Same reason as you," Tetelman replied plainly, staring off into the trees beyond the plot of land behind the store. Their silhouettes shook against the sky; wind, or night-birds.

"What reason's that?" Cherrick said, barely keeping his hostility in check.

"Greed," Tetelman replied mildly, still watching the trees. Something scampered across the low wooden roof. The monkey at Tetelman's feet listened, head cocked. "I thought I could make my fortune out here, the same way you do. I gave myself two years. Three at the most. That was the best part of two decades ago." He frowned;

whatever thoughts passed behind his eyes, they were bitter. "The jungle eats you up and spits you out, sooner or later." "Not me," said Locke.

Tetelman turned his eyes on the man. They were wet. "Oh yes," he said politely. "Extinction's in the air, Mr. Locke. I can smell it." Then he turned back to looking at the window.

Whatever was on the roof now had companions.

"They won't come here, will they?" said Cherrick. "They won't follow us?"

The question, spoken almost in a whisper, begged for a reply in the negative. Try as he might Cherrick couldn't dislodge the sights of the previous day. It wasn't the boy's corpse that so haunted him; that he could soon learn to forget. But the elder – with his shifting, sunlit face – and the palms raised as if to display some stigmata, he was not so forgettable.

"Don't fret," Tetelman said, with a trace of condescension. "Sometimes one or two of them will drift in here with a parrot to sell, or a few pots, but I've never seen them come here in any numbers. They don't like it. This is civilisation as far as they're concerned, and it intimidates them. Besides, they wouldn't harm my guests. They need me."

"Need you?" said Locke; who could need this wreck of a man?

"They use our medicines. Dancy supplies them. And blankets, once in a while. As I said, they're not so stupid." Next door, Stumpf had begun to howl. Dancy's con soling voice could be heard, attempting to talk down the panic. He was plainly failing.

"Your friend's gone bad," said Tetelman.

"No friend," Cherrick replied.

"It rots," Tetelman murmured, half to himself.

"What does?"

The soul." The word was utterly out of place from Tetelman's whisky-glossed lips. "It's like fruit, you see. It rots." Somehow Stumpf's cries gave force to the observation. It was not the voice of a wholesome creature; there was putrescence in it.

More to direct his attention away from the German's din than out of any real interest, Cherrick said: "What do they give you for the medicine and the blankets? Women?"

The possibility clearly entertained Tetelman; he laughed, his gold teeth gleaming. "I've no use for women," he said. "I've had the syph for too many years." He clicked his fingers and the monkey clambered back up on to his lap. "The soul," he said, “isn't the only thing that rots."

"Well, what do you get from them then?" Locke said. "For your supplies?"

"Artifacts," Tetelman replied. "B owls, jugs, mats. The Americans buy them off me, and sell them again in Manhattan. Everybody wants something made by an extinct tribe these days. Memento mori." "Extinct?" said Locke. The word had a seductive ring; it sounded like life to him.

"Oh certainly," said Tetelman. "They're as good as gone. If you don't wipe them out, they'll do it themselves." "Suicide?" Locke said.

"In their fashion. They just lose heart. I've seen it happen half a dozen times. A tribe loses its land, and its appetite for life goes with it. They stop taking care of themselves. The women don't get pregnant anymore; the young men take to drink, the old men just starve themselves to death. In a year or two it's like they never existed." Locke swallowed the rest of his drink, silently saluting the fatal wisdom of these people. They knew when to die, which was more than could be said for some he'd met. The thought of their death-wish absolved him of any last vestiges of guilt. What was the gun in his hand, except an instrument of evolution?

On the fourth day after their arrival at the post, Stumpf's fever abated, much to Dancy's disappointment. The worst of it's over," he announced. "Give him two more days' rest and you can get back to your labours." "What are your plans?" Tetelrnan wanted to know.

Locke was watching the rain from the verandah. Sheets of water pouring from clouds so low they brushed the treetops. Then, just as suddenly as it had arrived, the downpour was gone, as though a tap had been turned off. Sun broke through; the jungle, new-washed, was steaming and sprouting and thriving again.

"I don't know what we'll do," said Locke. "Maybe get ourselves some help and go back in there." "There are ways," Tetelman said.

Cherrick, sitting beside the door to get the benefit of what little breeze was available, picked up the glass that had scarcely been out of his hand in recent days, and filled it up again. "No more guns," he said. He hadn't touched his rifle since they'd arrived at the post; in fact he kept from contact with anything but a bottle and his bed. His skin seemed to crawl and creep perpetually.

"No need for guns," Tetelman murmured. The statement hung on the air like an unfulfilled promise. "Get rid of them without guns?" said Locke. "If you mean waiting for them to die out naturally, I'm not that patient." "No," said Tetelman, "we can be swifter than that."

"How?"

Tetelman gave the man a lazy look. "They're my livelihood," he said, “or part of it. You're asking me to help you make myself bankrupt."

He not only looks like an old whore, Locke thought, he thinks like one. "What's it worth? Your wisdom?" he asked. "A cut of whatever you find on your land," Tetelman replied.

Locke nodded. "What have we got to lose? Cherrick? You agree to cut him in?" Cherrick's consent was a shrug. "All right," Locke said, “talk."

"They need medicines," Tetelman explained, “because they're so susceptible to our diseases. A decent plague can wipe them out practically overnight."

Locke thought about this, not looking at Tetelman.

"One fell swoop," Tetelman continued. "They've got practically no defences against certain bacteria. Never had to build up any resistance. The clap. Smallpox. Even measles."

"How?" said Locke.

Another silence. Down the steps of the verandah, where civilization finished, the jungle was swelling to meet the sun. In the liquid heat plants blossomed and rotted and blossomed again.

"I asked how," Locke said.

"Blankets," Tetelman replied, “dead men's blankets."

A little before the dawn of the night after Stumpf's recovery,

Cherrick woke suddenly, startled from his rest by bad dreams. Outside it was pitch-dark; neither moon nor stars relieved the depth of the night. But his body-clock, which his life as a mercenary had trained to impressive accuracy, told him that first light was not far off, and he had no wish to lay his head down again and sleep. Not with the old man waiting to be dreamt. It wasn't just the raised palms, the blood glistening, that so distressed Cherrick. It was the words he'd dreamt coming from the old man's toothless mouth which had brought on the cold sweat that now encased his body. What were the words? He couldn't recall them now, but wanted to; wanted the sentiments dragged into wakefulness, where they could be dissected and dismissed as ridiculous. They wouldn't come though. He lay on his wretched cot, the dark wrapping him up too tightly for him to move, and suddenly the bloody hands were there, in front of him, suspended in the pitch. There was no face, no sky, no tribe. Just the hands.

"Dreaming," Cherrick told himself, but he knew better.

And now, the voice. He was getting his wish; here were the words he had dreamt spoken. Few of them made sense. Cherrick lay like a newborn baby, listening to its parents talk but unable to make any significance of their exchanges. He was ignorant, wasn't he? He tasted the sourness of his stupidity for the first time since childhood. The voice made him fearful of ambiguities he had ridden roughshod over, of whispers his shouting life had rendered inaudible. He fumbled for comprehension, and was not entirely frustrated. The man was speaking of the world, and of exile from the world; of being broken always by what one seeks to possess. Cherrick struggled, wishing he could stop the voice and ask for explanation. But it was already fading, ushered away by the wild address of parrots in the trees, raucous and gaudy voices erupting suddenly on every side. Through the mesh of Cherrick's mosquito net he could see the sky flaring through the branches. He sat up. Hands and voice had gone; and with them all but an irritating murmur of what he had almost understood. He had thrown off in sleep his single sheet; now he looked down at his body with distaste. His back and buttocks, and the underside of his thighs, felt sore. Too much sweating on coarse sheets, he thought. Not for the first time in recent days he remembered a small house in Bristol which he had once known as home.

The noise of birds was filling his head. He hauled himself to the edge of the bed and pulled back the mosquito net. The crude weave of the net seemed to scour the palm of his hand as he gripped it. He disengaged his hold, and cursed to himself. There was again today an itch of tenderness in his skin that he'd suffered since coming to the

post. Even the soles of his feet, pressed on to the floor by the weight of his body, seemed to suffer each knot and splinter. He wanted to be away from this place, and badly.

A warm trickle across his wrist caught his attention, and he was startled to see a rivulet of blood moving down his arm from his hand. There was a cut in the cushion of his thumb, where the mosquito net had apparently nicked his flesh. It was bleeding, though not copiously. He sucked at the cut, feeling again that peculiar sensitivity to touch that only drink, and that in abundance, dulled. Spitting out blood, he began to dress.

The clothes he put on were a scourge to his back. His sweat-stiffened shirt rubbed against his shoulders and neck; he seemed to feel every thread chafing his nerve-endings. The shirt might have been sackcloth, the way it abraded him. Next door, he heard Locke moving around. Gingerly finishing his dressing, Cherrick went through to join him. Locke was sitting at the table by the window. He was poring over a map of Tetelman's, and drinking a cup of the bitter coffee Dancy was so fond of brewing, which he drank with a dollop of condensed milk. The two men had little to say to each other. Since the incident in the village all pretence to respect or friendship had disappeared. Locke now showed undisguised contempt for his sometime companion. The only fact that kept them together was the contract they and Stumpf had signed. Rather than breakfast on whisky, which he knew Locke would take as a further sign of his decay, Cherrick poured himself a slug of Dancy's emetic and went out to look at the morning. He felt strange. There was something about this dawning day which made him profoundly uneasy. He knew the dangers of courting unfounded fears, and he tried to forbid them, but they were incontestable. Was it simply exhaustion that made him so painfully conscious of his many discomforts this morning? Why else did he feel the pressure of his stinking clothes so acutely? The rasp of his boot collar against the jutting bone of his ankle, the rhythmical chafing of his trousers against his inside leg as he walked, even the grazing air that eddied around his exposed face and arms. The world was pressing on him – at least that was the sensation – pressing as though it wanted him out.

A large dragonfly, whining towards him on iridescent wings, collided with his arm. The pain of the collision caused him to drop his mug. It didn't break, but rolled off the verandah and was lost in the undergrowth. Angered, Cherrick slapped the insect off, leaving a smear of blood on his tattooed forearm to mark the dragonfly's demise. He wiped it off. It welled up again on the same spot, full and dark.

It wasn't the blood of the insect, he realised, but his own. The dragonfly had cut him somehow, though he had felt nothing. Irritated, he peered more closely at his punctured skin. The wound was not significant, but it was painful. From inside he could hear Locke talking. He was loudly describing the inadequacy of his fellow adventures to Tetelman.

"Stumpf s not fit for this kind of work," he was saying.

"And Cherrick -”

"What about me?"

Cherrick stepped into the shabby interior, wiping a new flow of blood from his arm.

Locke didn't even bother to look up at him.

"You're paranoid," he said plainly. "Paranoid and unreliable."

Cherrick was in no mood for taking Locke's foul- mouthing. "Just because I killed some Indian brat," he said. The more he brushed blood from his bitten arm, the more the place stung. "You just didn't have the balls to do it yourself."

Locke still didn't bother to look up from his perusal of the map. Cherrick moved across to the table. "Are you listening to me?" he demanded, and added force to his question by slamming his fist down on to the table. On impact his hand simply burst open. Blood spurted out in every direction, spattering the map. Cherrick howled, and reeled backwards from the table with blood pouring from a yawning split in the side of his hand. The bone showed. Through the din of pain in his head he could hear a quiet voice. The words were inaudible, but he knew whose they were.

"I won't hear!" he said, shaking his head like a dog with a flea in its ear. He staggered back against the wall, but the briefest of contacts was another agony. "I won't hear, damn you!"

"What the hell's he talking about?" Dancy had appeared in the doorway, woken by the cries, still clutching the Complete Works of Shelley Tetelman had said he could not sleep without.

Locke re-addressed the question to Cherrick, who was standing, wild-eyed, in the corner of the room, blood spitting from between his fingers as he attempted to staunch his wounded hand. "What are you

saying?" "He spoke to me," Cherrick replied. "The old man."

"What old man?" Tetelman asked.

"He means at the village," Locke said. Then, to Cherrick, "Is that what you mean?"

"He wants us out. Exiles. Like them. Like them!"

Cherrick's panic was rapidly rising out of anyone's control, least of all his own.

"The man's got heat-stroke," Dancy said, ever the diagnostician. Locke knew better.

"Your hand needs bandaging…" he said, slowly approaching Cherrick.

"I heard him…" Cherrick muttered.

"I believe you. Just slow down. We can sort it out."

"No," the other man replied. "It's pushing us out. Everything we touch. Everything we touch."

He looked as though he was about to topple over, and Locke reached for him. As his hands made contact with Cherrick's shoulders the flesh beneath the shirt split, and Locke's hands were instantly soaked in scarlet. He withdrew them, appalled. Cherrick fell to his knees, which in their turn became new wounds. He stared down as his shirt and trousers darkened. "What's happening to me?" he wept.

Dancy moved towards him. "Let me help."

"No! Don't touch me!" Cherrick pleaded, but Dancy wasn't to be denied his nursing.

"It's all right," he said in his best bedside manner.

It wasn't. Dancy's grip, intended only to lift the man from his bleeding knees, opened new cuts wherever he took hold. Dancy felt the blood sprout beneath his hand, felt the flesh slip away from the bone. The sensation bested even his taste for agony. Like Locke, he forsook the lost man.

"He's rotting," he murmured.

Cherrick's body had split now in a dozen or more places. He tried to stand, half staggering to his feet only to collapse again, his flesh breaking open whenever he touched wall or chair or floor. There was no help for him. All the others could do was stand around like spectators at an execution, awaiting the final throes. Even Stumpf had roused himself from his bed and come through to see what all the shouting was about. He stood leaning against the door-lintel, his disease-thinned face all disbelief.

Another minute, and blood-loss defeated Cherrick.

He keeled over and sprawled, face down, across the floor. Dancy crossed back to him and crouched on his haunches beside his head.

"Is he dead?" Locke asked.

"Almost," Dancy replied.

"Rotted," said Tetelman, as though the word explained the atrocity they had just witnessed. He had a crucifix in his hand, large and crudely carved. It looked like Indian handiwork, Locke thought. The Messiah impaled on the tree was sloe-eyed and indecently naked. He smiled, despite nail and thorn.

Dancy touched Cherrick's body, letting the blood come with his touch, and turned the man over, then leaned in towards Cherrick's jittering face. The dying man's lips were moving, oh so slightly.

"What are you saying?" Dancy asked; he leaned closer still to catch the man's words. Cherrick's mouth trailed bloody spittle, but no sound came.

Locke stepped in, pushing Dancy aside. Flies were already flitting around Cherrick's face. Locke thrust his bull-necked head into Cherrick's view. "You hear me?" he said.

The body grunted.

"You know me?"

Again, a grunt.

"You want to give me your share of the land?"

The grunt was lighter this time; almost a sigh.

There's witnesses here," Locke said. "Just say yes.

They'll hear you. Just say yes."

The body was trying its best. It opened its mouth a little wider.

"Dancy -" said Locke. "You hear what he said?"

Dancy could not disguise his horror at Locke's insistence, but he nodded.

"You're a witness."

"If you must," said the Englishman.

Deep in his body Cherrick felt the fish-bone he'd first choked on in the village twist itself about one final time, and extinguish him.

"Did he say yes, Dancy?" Tetelman asked.

Dancy felt the physical proximity of the brute kneeling beside him. He didn't know what the dead man had said, but what did it matter? Locke would have the land anyway, wouldn't he?

"He said yes."

Locke stood up, and went in search of a fresh cup of coffee.

Without thinking, Dancy put his fingers on Cherrick's lids to seal his empty gaze. Under that lightest of touches the lids broke open and blood tainted the tears that had swelled where Cherrick's sight had been.

They had buried him towards evening. The corpse, though it had lain through the noon-heat in the coolest part of the store, amongst the dried goods, had begun to putrefy by the time it was sewn up in canvas for the burial. The night following, Stumpf had come to Locke and offered him the last third of the territory to add to Cherrick's share, and Locke, ever the realist, had accepted. The terms, which were punitive, had been worked out the next day. In the evening of that day, as Stumpf had hoped, the supply plane came in. Locke, bored with Tetelman's contemptuous looks, had also elected to fly back to Santarem, there to drink the jungle out of his system for a few days, and return refreshed. He intended to buy up fresh supplies, and, if possible, hire a reliable driver and gunman. The flight was noisy, cramped and tedious; the two men exchanged no words for its full duration. Stumpf just kept his eyes on the tracts of unfelled wilderness they passed over, though from one hour to the next the scene scarcely

changed. A panorama of sable green, broken on occasion by a glint of water; perhaps a column of blue smoke rising here and there, where land was being cleared; little else.

At Santarem they parted with a single handshake which left every nerve in Stumpf's hand scourged, and an open cut in the tender flesh between index finger and thumb.

Santarem wasn't Rio, Locke mused as he made his way down to a bar at the south end of the town, run by a veteran of Vietnam who had a taste for ad hoc animal shows. It was one of Locke's few certain pleasures, and one he never tired of, to watch a local woman, face dead as a cold manioc cake, submit to a dog or a donkey for a few grubby dollar bills. The women of Santarem were, on the whole, as unpalatable as the beer, but Locke had no eye for beauty in the opposite sex: it mattered only that their bodies be in reasonable working order, and not diseased. He found the bar, and settled down for an evening exchanging dirt with the American. When he tired of that – sometime after midnight – he bought a bottle of whisky and went out looking for a face to press his heat upon. The woman with the squint was about to accede to a particular peccadillo of Locke's – one which she had resolutely refused until drunkenness persuaded her to abandon what little hope of dignity she had – when there came a rap on the door.

"Fuck," said Locke.

"Si," said the woman. "Fook. Fook." It seemed to be the only word she knew in anything resembling English. Locke ignored her and crawled drunkenly to the edge of the stained mattress. Again, the rap on the door. "Who is it?" he said.

"Senhor Locke?" The voice from the hallway was that of a young boy.

"Yes?" said Locke. His trousers had become lost in the tangle of sheets. "Yes? What do you want?" "Mensagem," the boy said. "Urgente. Urgente."

"For me?" He had found his trousers, and was pulling them on. The woman, not at all disgruntled by this desertion, watched him from the head of the bed, toying with an empty bottle. Buttoning up, Locke crossed from bed to door, a matter of three steps. He unlocked it. The boy in the darkened hallway was of Indian extraction to judge by the blackness of his eyes, and that peculiar luster his skin owned. He was

dressed in a T-shirt bearing the Coca-Cola motif.

"Mensagem, Senhor Locke," he said again,"… do hospital."

The boy was staring past Locke at the woman on the bed. He grinned from ear to ear at her cavortings. "Hospital?" said Locke.

"'Sim. Hospital "Sacrado Coraqa de Maria'."

It could only be Stumpf, Locke thought. W ho else did he know in this corner of Hell who'd call upon him? Nobody. He looked down at the leering child.

"Vem comigo," the boy said, “vem comigo. Urgente."

"No," said Locke. "I'm not coming. Not now. You understand? Later. Later."

The boy shrugged. "… Ta morrendo," he said.

"Dying?" said Locke.

"Sim. Ta morrendo."

"Well, let him. Understand me? You go back, and tell him, I won't come until I'm ready."

Again, the boy shrugged. "E meu dinheiro? he said, as Locke went to close the door.

"You go to Hell," Locke replied, and slammed it in the child's face.

When, two hours and one ungainly act of passionless sex later, Locke unlocked the door, he discovered that the child, by way of revenge, had defecated on the threshold.

The hospital "Sacrado Coraqa de Maria' was no place to fall ill; better, thought Locke, as he made his way down the dingy corridors, to die in your own bed with your own sweat for company than come here. The stench of disinfectant could not entirely mask the odour of human pain. The walls were ingrained with it; it formed a grease on the lamps, it slickened the unwashed floors. What had happened to Stumpf to bring him here? a bar-room brawl, an argument with a pimp about the price of a woman? The German was just damn fool enough to get himself stuck in the gut over something so petty. "Senhor Stumpf?" he asked of a woman in white he accosted in the corridor. "I'm looking for Senhor Stumpf."

The woman shook her head, and pointed towards a harried-looking man further down the corridor, who was taking a moment to light a small cigar. He let go the nurse's arm and approached the fellow. He was enveloped in a stinking cloud of smoke.

"I'm looking for Senhor Stumpf," he said.

The man peered at him quizzically.

"You are Locke?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Ah." He drew on the cigar. The pungency of the expelled smoke would surely have brought on a relapse in the hardiest patient. "I'm Doctor Edson Costa," the man said, offering his clammy hand to Locke. "Your friend has been waiting for you to come all night."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's hurt his eye," Edson Costa replied, clearly indifferent to Stumpf s condition. "And he has some minor abrasions on his hands and face. But he won't have anyone go near him. He doctored himself." "Why?" Locke asked.

The doctor looked flummoxed. "He pays to go in a clean room. Pays plenty. So I put him in. You want to see him? Maybe take him away?"

"Maybe," said Locke, unenthusiastically.

"His head…" said the doctor. "He has delusions."

Without offering further explanation, the man led off at a considerable rate, trailing tobacco-smoke as he went. The route, that wound out of the main building and across a small internal courtyard, ended at a room with a glass partition in the door.

"Here," said the doctor. "Your friend. You tell him," he said as a parting snipe, “he pay more, or tomorrow he leaves."

Locke peered through the glass partition. The grubby- white room was empty, but for a bed and a small table, lit by the same dingy light that cursed every wretched inch of this establishment. Stumpf was not on the bed, but squatting on the floor in the corner of the room. His left eye was covered with a bulbous padding, held in place by a bandage ineptly wrapped around his head. Locke was looking at the

man for a good time before Stumpf sensed that he was watched. He looked up slowly. His good eye, as if in compensation for the loss of its companion, seemed to have swelled to twice its natural size. It held enough fear for both it and its twin; indeed enough for a dozen eyes. Cautiously, like a man whose bones are so brittle he fears an injudicious breath will shatter them, Stumpf edged up the wall, and crossed to the door. He did not open it, but addressed Locke through the glass.

"Why didn't you come?" he said.

I'm here."

"But sooner," said Stumpf. His face was raw, as if he'd been beaten. "Sooner."

"I had business," Locke returned. "What happened to you?"

"It's true, Locke," the German said, “everything is true."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tetelman told me. Cherrick's babblings. About being exiles. It's true. They mean to drive us out." "We're not in the jungle now," Locke said. "You've got nothing to be afraid of here."

"Oh yes," said Stumpf, that wide eye wider than ever. "Oh yes! I saw him -”

"Who?"

"The elder. From the village. He was here."

"Ridiculous."

"He was here, damn you," Stumpf replied. "He was standing where you're standing. Looking at me through the glass."

"You've been drinking too much."

"It happened to Cherrick, and now it's happening to me. They're making it impossible to live -” Locke snorted. I'm not having any problem," he said.

"They won't let you escape," Stumpf said. "None of us'll escape. Not unless we make amends." "You've got to vacate the room," Locke said, unwilling to countenance any more of this drivel. "I've been told

you've got to get out by morning."

"No," said Stumpf. "I can't leave. I can't leave."

"There's nothing to fear."

"The dust," said the German. The dust in the air. It'll cut me up. I got a speck in my eye – just a speck – and the next thing my eye's bleeding as though it'll never stop. I can't hardly lie down, the sheet's like a bed of nails. The soles of my feet feel as if they're going to split. You've got to help me."

"How?" said Locke.

"Pay them for the room. Pay them so I can stay 'til you can get a specialist from Sao Luis. Then go back to the village, Locke. Go back and tell them. I don't want the land. Tell them I don't own it any longer." "I'll go back," said Locke, “but in my good time."

"You must go quickly," said Stumpf. "Tell them to let me be."

Suddenly, the expression on the partially-masked face changed, and Stumpf looked past Locke at some spectacle down the corridor. From his mouth, slack with fear, came the small word, "Please."

Locke, mystified by the man's expression, turned. The corridor was empty, except for the fat moths that were besetting the bulb. "There's nothing there -” he said, turning back to the door of Stumpf s room. The wire-mesh glass of the window bore the distinct imprint of two bloody palms.

"He's here," the German was saying, staring fixedly at the miracle of the bleeding glass. Locke didn't need to ask who. He raised his hand to touch the marks. The handprints, still wet, were on his side of the glass, not on Stumpf's. "My God," he breathed. How could anyone have slipped between him and the door and laid the prints there, sliding away again in the brief moment it had taken him to glance behind him? It defied reason. Again he looked back down the corridor. It was still bereft of visitors. Just the bulb – swinging slightly, as if a breeze of passage had caught it and the moth's wings, whispering. "What's happening?" Locke breathed. Stumpf, entranced by the handprints, touched his fingertips lightly to the glass. On contact, his fingers blossomed blood, trails of which idled down the glass. He didn't remove his fingers, but stared through at Locke with despair in his eye.

"See?" he said, very quietly.

"What are you playing at?" Locke said, his voice similarly hushed. This is some kind of trick." "No."

"You haven't got Cherrick's disease. You can't have. You didn't touch them. We agreed, damn you," he said, more heatedly. "Cherrick touched them, we didn't." Stumpf looked back at Locke with something close to pity on his face. "We were wrong," he said gently. His fingers, which he had now removed from the glass, continued to bleed, dribbling across the backs of his hands and down his arms. "This isn't something you can beat into submission, Locke. It's out of our hands." He raised his bloody fingers, smiling at his own word-play: "See?" he said. The German's sudden, fatalistic calm frightened Locke. He reached for the handle of the door, and jiggled it. The room was locked. The key was on the inside, where Stumpf had paid for it to be.

"Keep out," Stumpf said. "Keep away from me."

His smile had vanished. Locke put his shoulder to the door.

"Keep out, I said," Stumpf shouted, his voice shrill. He backed away from the door as Locke took another lunge at it. Then, seeing that the lock must soon give, he raised a cry of alarm. Locke took no notice, but continued to throw himself at the door. There came the sound of wood beginning to splinter.

Somewhere nearby Locke heard a woman's voice, raised in response to Stumpf's calls. No matter; he'd have his hands on the German before help could come, and then, by Christ, he'd wipe every last vestige of a smile from the bastard's lips. He threw himself against the door with increased fervor; again, and again. The door gave. In the antiseptic cocoon of his room Stumpf felt the first blast of unclean air from the outside world. It was no more than a light breeze that invaded his makeshift sanctuary, but it bore upon its back the debris of the world. Soot and seeds, flakes of skin itched off a thousand scalps, fluff and sand and twists of hair; the bright dust from a moth's wing. Motes so small the human eye only glimpsed them in a shaft of white sunlight; each a tiny, whirling speck quite harmless to most living organisms. But this cloud was lethal to Stumpf; in seconds his body became a field of tiny, seeping wounds.

He screeched, and ran towards the door to slam it closed again, flinging himself into a hail of minute razors, each lacerating him.

Pressing against the door to prevent Locke from entering, his wounded hands erupted. He was too late to keep Locke out anyhow. The man had pushed the door wide, and was now stepping through, his every movement setting up further currents of air to cut Stumpf down. He snatched hold of the German's wrist. At his grip the skin opened as if beneath a knife. Behind him, a woman loosed a cry of horror. Locke, realizing that Stumpf was past recanting his laughter, let the man go. Adorned with cuts on every exposed part of his body, and gaining more by the moment, Stumpf stumbled back, blind, and fell beside the bed. The killing air still sliced him as he sank down; with each agonised shudder he woke new eddies and whirlpools to open him up.

Ashen, Locke retreated from where the body lay, and staggered out into the corridor. A gaggle of onlookers blocked it; they parted, however, at his approach, too intimidated by his bulk and by the wild look on his face to challenge him. He retraced his steps through the sickness-perfumed maze, crossing the small courtyard and returning into the main building. He briefly caught sight of Edson Costa hurrying in pursuit, but did not linger for explanations. In the vestibule, which, despite the late hour was busy with victims of one kind or another, his harried gaze alighted on a small boy, perched on his mother's lap. He had injured his belly apparently. His shirt, which was too large for him, was stained with blood; his face with tears. The mother did not look up as Locke moved through the throng. The child did however. He raised his head as if knowing that Locke was about to pass by, and smiled radiantly.

There was nobody Locke knew at Tetelman's store; and all the information he could bully from the hired hands, most of whom were drunk to the point of being unable to stand, was that their masters had gone off into the jungle the previous day. Locke chased the most sober of them and persuaded him with threats to accompany him back to the village as translator. He had no real idea of how he would make his peace with the tribe. He was only certain that he had to argue his innocence. After all, he would plead, it hadn't been he who had fired the killing shot. There had been misunderstandings, to be certain, but he had not harmed the people in any way. How could they, in all conscience, conspire to hurt him? If they should require some penance of him he was not above acceding to their demands. Indeed, might there not be some satisfaction in the act? He had seen so much suffering of late. He wanted to be cleansed of it. Anything they asked, within reason, he would comply with; anything to avoid dying like the others. He'd even give back the land.

It was a rough ride, and his morose companion complained often

and incoherently. Locke turned a deaf ear. There was no time for loitering. Their noisy progress, the jeep engine complaining at every new acrobatic required of it, brought the jungle alive on every side, a repertoire of wails, whoops and screeches. It was an urgent, hungry place, Locke thought: and for the first time since setting foot on this sub-continent he loathed it with all his heart. There was no room here to make sense of events; the best that could be hoped was that one be allowed a niche to breathe awhile between one squalid flowering and the next.

Half an hour before nightfall, exhausted by the journey, they came to the outskirts of the village. The place had altered not at all in the meagre days since he'd last been here, but the ring of huts was clearly deserted. The doors gaped; the communal fires, always alight, were ashes. There was neither child nor pig to turn an eye towards him as he moved across the compound. When he reached the centre of the ring he stood still, looking about him for some clue as to what had happened there. He found none, however. Fatigue irade him foolhardy. Mustering his fractured strength, he shouted into the hush: "Where are you?"

Two brilliant red macaws, finger-winged, rose screeching from the trees on the far side of the village. A few moments after, a figure emerged from the thicket of balsa and jacaranda. It was not one of the tribe, but Dancy. He paused before stepping fully into sight; then, recognising Locke, a broad smile broke his face, and he advanced into the compound. Behind him, the foliage shook as others made their way through it. Tetelman was there, as were several Norwegians, led by a man called Bjornstrom, whom Locke had encountered briefly at the trading post. His face, beneath a shock of sun-bleached hair, was like cooked lobster.

"My God," said Tetelman, "what are you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same question," Locke replied testily.

Bjornstrom waved down the raised rifles of his three companions and strode forward, bearing a placatory smile. "Mr. Locke," the Norwegian said, extending a leather- gloved hand. "It is good we meet."

Locke looked down at the stained glove with disgust, and Bjornstrom, flashing a self-admonishing look, pulled it off. The hand beneath was pristine.

"My apologies," he said. "We've been working."

"At what?" Locke asked, the acid in his stomach edging its way up into the back of his throat.

Tetelman spat. "Indians," he said.

"Where's the tribe?" Locke said.

Again, Tetelman: "Bjornstrom claims he's got rights to this territory…"

"The tribe," Locke insisted. "Where are they?"

The Norwegian toyed with his glove.

"Did you buy them out, or what?" Locke asked.

"Not exactly," Bjornstrom replied. His English, like his profile, was impeccable.

"Bring him along," Dancy suggested with some enthusiasm. "Let him see for himself."

Bjornstrom nodded. "Why not?" he said. "Don't touch anything, Mr. Locke. And tell your carrier to stay where he is."

Dancy had already about turned, and was heading into the thicket; now Bjornstrom did the same, escorting Locke across the compound towards a corridor hacked through the heavy foliage. Locke could scarcely keep pace; his limbs were more reluctant with every step he took. The ground had been heavily trodden along this track. A litter of leaves and orchid blossoms had been mashed into the sodden soil.

They had dug a pit in a small clearing no more than a hundred yards from the compound. It was not deep, this pit, nor was it very large. The mingled smells of lime and petrol cancelled out any other scent.

Tetelman, who had reached the clearing ahead of Locke, hung back from approaching the lip of the earthworks, but Dancy was not so fastidious. He strode around the far side of the pit and beckoned to Locke to view the contents. The tribe were putrefying already. They lay where they had been thrown, in a jumble of breasts and buttocks and faces and limbs, their bodies tinged here and there with purple and black. Flies built helter-skelters in the air above them.

"An education," Dancy commented.

Locke just looked on as Bjornstrom moved around the other side of the pit to join Dancy.

"All of them?" Locke asked.

The Norwegian nodded. "One fell swoop," he said, pronouncing each word with unsettling precision. "Blankets," said Tetelman, naming the murder weapon.

"But so quickly…" Locke murmured.

"It's very efficient," said Dancy. "And difficult to prove. Even if anybody ever asks."

"Disease is natural," Bjornstrom observed. "Yes? Like the trees."

Locke slowly shook his head, his eyes pricking.

"I hear good things of you," Bjornstrom said to him. "Perhaps we can work together."

Locke didn't even attempt to reply. Others of the Norwegian party had laid down their rifles and were now getting back to work, moving the few bodies still to be pitched amongst their fellows from the forlorn heap beside the pit. Locke could see a child amongst the tangle, and an old man, whom even now the burial party were picking up. The corpse looked jointless as they swung it over the edge of the hole. It tumbled down the shallow incline and came to rest face up, its arms flung up to either side of its head in a gesture of submission, or expulsion. It was the elder of course, whom Cherrick had faced. His palms were still red. There was a neat bullet-hole in his temple. Disease and hopelessness had not been entirely efficient, apparently.

Locke watched while the next of the bodies was thrown into the mass grave, and a third to follow that. Bjornstrom, lingering on the far side of the pit, was lighting a cigarette. He caught Locke's eye.

"So it goes," he said.

From behind Locke, Tetelman spoke.

"We thought you wouldn't come back," he said, per- haps attempting to excuse his alliance with Bjornstrom. "Stumpf is dead," said Locke.

"Well, even less to divide up," Tetelman said, approaching him and

laying a hand on his shoulder. Locke didn't reply; he just stared down amongst the bodies, which were now being covered with lime, only slowly registering the warmth that was running down his body from the spot where Tetelman had touched him. Disgusted, the man had removed his hand, and was staring at the growing bloodstain on Locke's shirt.

XXIX: TWILIGHT AT THE TOWERS

The photographs of Mironenko which Ballard had been shown in Munich had proved far from instructive. Only one or two pictured the KGB man full face; and of the others most were blurred and grainy, betraying their furtive origins. Ballard was not overmuch concerned. He knew from long and occasionally bitter experience that the eye was all too ready to be deceived; but there were other faculties – the remnants of senses modern life had rendered obsolete – which he had learned to call into play, enabling him to sniff out the least signs of betrayal. These were the talents he would use when he met with Mironenko. With them, he would root the truth from the man. The truth? Therein lay the conundrum of course, for in this context wasn't sincerity a movable feast? Sergei Zakharovich Mironenko had been a Section Leader in Directorate S of the KGB for eleven years, with access to the most privileged information on the dispersal of Soviet Illegals in the West. In the recent weeks, however, he had made his disenchantment with his present masters, and his consequent desire to defect, known to the British Security Service. In return for the elaborate efforts which would have to be made on his behalf he had volunteered to act as an agent within the KGB for a period of three months, after which time he would be taken into the bosom of democracy and hidden where his vengeful overlords would never find him. It had fallen to Ballard to meet the Russian face to face, in the hope of establishing whether Mironenko's disaffection from his ideology was real or faked. The answer would not be found on Mironenko's lips, Ballard knew, but in some behavioural nuance which only instinct would comprehend.

Time was when Ballard would have found the puzzle fascinating; that his every waking thought would have circled on the unraveling ahead. But such commitment had belonged to a man convinced his actions had some significant effect upon the world. He was wiser now. The agents of East and West went about their secret works year in, year out. They plotted; they connived; occasionally (though rarely) they shed blood. There were debacles and trade-offs and minor tactical victories. But in the end things were much the same as ever.

This city, for instance. Ballard had first come to Berlin in April of 1969. He'd been twenty-nine, fresh from years of intensive training, and ready to live a little. But he had not felt easy here. He found the city charmless; often bleak. It had taken Odell, his colleague for those first two years, to prove that Berlin was worthy of his affections, and

once Ballard fell he was lost for life. Now he felt more at home in this divided city than he ever had in London. Its unease, its failed idealism, and – perhaps most acutely of all – its terrible isolation, matched his. He and it, maintaining a presence in a wasteland of dead ambition.

He found Mironenko at the Germalde Galerie, and yes, the photographs had lied. The Russian looked older than his forty-six years, and sicker than he'd appeared in those filched portraits. Neither man made any sign of acknowledgement. They idled through the collection for a full half-hour, with Mironenko showing acute, and apparently genuine, interest in the work on view. Only when both men were satisfied that they were not being watched did the Russian quit the building and lead Ballard into the polite suburbs of Dahlem to a mutually agreed safe house. There, in a small and unheated kitchen, they sat down and talked.

Mironenko's command of English was uncertain, or at least appeared so, though Ballard had the impression that his struggles for sense were as much tactical as grammatical. He might well have presented the same facade in the Russian's situation; it seldom hurt to appear less competent than one was. But despite the difficulties he had in expressing himself, Mironenko's avowals were unequivocal.

"I am no longer a Communist," he stated plainly, "I have not been a party-member – not here -" he put his fist to his chest'- for many years."

He fetched an off-white handkerchief from his coat pocket, pulled off one of his gloves, and plucked a bottle of tablets from the folds of the handkerchief.

"Forgive me," he said as he shook tablets from the bottle. "I have pains. In my head; in my hands." Ballard waited until he had swallowed the medication before asking him, "Why did you begin to doubt?" The Russian pocketed the bottle and the handkerchief, his wide face devoid of expression.

"How does a man lose his… his faith?" he said. "Is it that I saw too much; or too little, perhaps?" He looked at Ballard's face to see if his hesitant words had made sense. Finding no comprehension there he tried again.

"I think the man who does not believe he is lost, is lost."

The paradox was elegantly put; Ballard's suspicion as to Mironenko's true command of English was confirmed. "Are you lost nozi?" Ballard

inquired.

Mironenko didn't reply. He was pulling his other glove off and staring at his hands. The pills he had swallowed did not seem to be easing the ache he had complained of. He fisted and unfisted his hands like an arthritis sufferer testing the advance of his condition. Not looking up, he said: "I was taught that the Party had solutions to every- thing. That made me free from fear."

"And now?"

"Now?" he said. "Now I have strange thoughts. They come to me from nowhere…"

"Go on," said Ballard.

Mironenko made a tight smile. "You must know me inside out, yes? Even what I dream?"

"Yes," said Ballard.

Mironenko nodded. "It would be the same with us," he said. Then, after a pause: "I've thought sometimes I would break open. Do you understand what I say? I would crack, because there is such rage inside me. And that makes me afraid, Ballard. I think they will see how much I hate them." He looked up at his interrogator. "You must be quick," he said, “or they will discover me. I try not to think of what they will do." Again, he paused. All trace of the smile, however humourless, had gone. "The Directorate has Sections even I don't have knowledge of. Special hospitals, where nobody can go. They have ways to break a man's soul in pieces."

Ballard, ever the pragmatist, wondered if Mironenko's vocabulary wasn't rather high-flown. In the hands of the KGB he doubted if he would be thinking of his soul's contentment. After all, it was the body that had the nerve-endings.

They talked for an hour or more, the conversation moving back and forth between politics and personal reminiscence, between trivia and confessional. At the end of the meeting Ballard was in no doubt as to Mironenko's antipathy to his masters. He was, as he had said, a man without faith.

The following day Ballard met with Cripps in the restaurant at the Schweizerhof Hotel, and made his verbal report on Mironenko.

"He's ready and waiting. But he insists we be quick about making up our minds."

"I'm sure he does," Cripps said. His glass eye was troubling him today; the chilly air, he explained, made it sluggish. It moved fractionally more slowly than his real eye, and on occasion Cripps had to nudge it with his fingertip to get it moving.

"We're not going to rushed into any decision," Cripps said.

"Where's the problem? I don't have any doubt about his commitment; or his desperation."

"So you said," Cripps replied. "Would you like something for dessert?"

"Do you doubt my appraisal? Is that what it is?"

"Have something sweet to finish off, so that I don't feel an utter reprobate."

"You think I'm wrong about him, don't you?" Ballard pressed. When Cripps didn't reply, Ballard leaned across the table. "You do, don't you?"

"I'm just saying there's reason for caution," Cripps said. "If we finally choose to take him on board the Russians are going to be very distressed. We have to be sure the deal's worth the bad weather that comes with it. Things are so dicey at the moment."

"When aren't they?" Ballard replied. "Tell me a time when there wasn't some crisis in the offing?" H e settled back in the chair and tried to read Cripps' face. His glass eye was, if anything, more candid than the real one. "I'm sick of this damn game," Ballard muttered.

The glass eye roved. "Because of the Russian?"

"Maybe."

"Believe me," said Cripps, "I've got good reason to be careful with this man."

"Name one."

"There's nothing verified."

"What have you got on him?" Ballard insisted.

"As I say, rumour," Cripps replied.

"Why wasn't I briefed about it?"

Cripps made a tiny shake of his head. "It's academic now," he said. "You've provided a good report. I just want you to understand that if things don't go the way you think they should it's not because your appraisals aren't trusted." "I see."

"No you don't," said Cripps. "You're feeling martyred; and I don't altogether blame you."

"So what happens now? I'm supposed to forget I ever met the man?"

"Wouldn't do any harm," said Cripps. "Out of sight, out of mind."

Clearly Cripps didn't trust Ballard to take his own advice. Though Ballard made several discreet enquiries about the Mironenko case in the following week it was plain that his usual circle of contacts had been warned to keep their lips sealed.

As it was, the next news about the case reached Ballard via the pages of the morning papers, in an article about a body found in a house near the station on Kaiser Damm. At the time of reading he had no way of knowing how the account tied up with Mironenko, but there was enough detail in the story to arouse his interest. For one, he had the suspicion that the house named in the article had been used by the Service on occasion; for another, the article described how two unidentified men had almost been caught in the act of removing the body, further suggesting that this was no crime of passion.

About noon, he went to see Cripps at his offices in the hope of coaxing him with some explanation, but Cripps was not available, nor would be, his secretary explained, until further notice; matters arising had taken him back to Munich. Ballard left a message that he wished to speak with him when he returned.

As he stepped into the cold air again, he realised that he'd gained an admirer; a thin-faced individual whose hair had retreated from his brow, leaving a ludicrous forelock at the high-water mark. Ballard knew him in passing from Cripps' entourage but couldn't put a name to the face. It was swiftly provided.

"Suckling," the man said.

"Of course," said Ballard. "Hello."

"I think maybe we should talk, if you have a moment," the man said. His voice was as pinched as his features; Ballard wanted none of his gossip. He was about to refuse the offer when Suckling said: "I suppose you heard what happened to Cripps."

Ballard shook his head. Suckling, delighted to possess this nugget, said again: "We should talk." They walked along the Kantstrasse towards the Zoo. The street was busy with lunchtime pedestrians, but Ballard scarcely noticed them. The story that Suckling unfolded as they walked demanded his full and absolute attention. It was simply told. Cripps, it appeared, had made an arrangement to meet with Mironenko in order to make his own assessment of the Russian's integrity. The house in Schoneberg chosen for the meeting had been used on several previous occasions, and had long been considered one of the safest locations in the city. It had not proved so the previous evening however. KGB men had apparently followed Mironenko to the house, and then attempted to break the party up. There was nobody to testify to what had happened subsequently – both the men who had accompanied Cripps, one of them Ballard's old colleague Odell – were dead; Cripps himself was in a coma. "And Mironenko?" Ballard inquired.

Suckling shrugged. They took him home to the Motherland, presumably," he said.

Ballard caught a whiff of deceit off the man.

"I'm touched that you're keeping me up to date," he said to Suckling. "But why?

"You and Odell were friends, weren't you?" came the reply. "With Cripps out of the picture you don't have many of those left."

"Is that so?"

"No offence intended," Suckling said hurriedly. "But you've got a reputation as a maverick."

"Get to the point," said Ballard.

"There is no point," Suckling protested. "I just thought you ought to know what had happened. I'm putting my neck on the line here."

"Nice try," said Ballard. He stopped walking. Suckling wandered on a pace or two before turning to find Ballard grinning at him.

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me," Suckling said.

"Clever to send the court gossip. I almost fell for it. You're very plausible."

There wasn't enough fat on Suckling's face to hide the tic in his cheek.

"What do they suspect me of? Do they think I'm conniving with Mironenko, is that it? No, I don't think they're that stupid."

Suckling shook his head, like a doctor in the presence of some incurable disease. "You like making enemies?" he said.

"Occupational hazard. I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. I don't."

"There's changes in the air," Suckling said. "I'd make sure you have your answers ready."

"Fuck the answers," Ballard said courteously. "I think it's about time I worked out the right questions."

Sending Suckling to sound him out smacked of desperation. They wanted inside information; but about what? Could they seriously believe he had some involvement with Mironenko; or worse, with the RGB itself? He let his resentment subside; it was stirring up too much mud, and he needed clear water if he was to find his way free of this confusion. In one regard, Suckling was perfectly correct: he did have enemies, and with Cripps indisposed he was vulnerable. In such circumstances there were two courses of action.

He could return to London, and there lie low, or wait around in Berlin to see what maneuver they tried next. He decided on the latter. The charm of hide-and-seek was rapidly wearing thin.

As he turned North onto Leibnizstrasse he caught the reflection of a grey-coated man in a shop window. It was a glimpse, no more, but he had the feeling that he knew the fellow's face. Had they put a watch-dog onto him, he wondered? He turned, and caught the man's eye, holding it. The suspect seemed embarrassed, and looked away. A performance perhaps; and then again, perhaps not. It mattered little, Ballard thought. Let them watch him all they liked. He was guiltless. If indeed there was such a condition this side of insanity.

A strange happiness had found Sergei Mironenko; happiness that came without rhyme or reason, and filled his heart up to overflowing.

Only the previous day circumstances had seemed unendurable. The aching in his hands and head and spine had steadily worsened, and was now accompanied by an itch so demanding he'd had to snip his nails to the flesh to prevent himself doing serious damage. His body, he had concluded, was in revolt against him. It was that thought which he had tried to explain to Ballard: that he was divided from himself, and feared that he would soon be torn apart. But today the fear had gone.

Not so the pains. They were, if anything, worse than they'd been yesterday. His sinews and ligaments ached as if they'd been exercised beyond the limits of their design; there were bruises at all his joints, where blood had broken its banks beneath the skin. But that sense of imminent rebellion had disappeared, to be replaced with a dreamy peacefulness. And at its heart, such happiness.

When he tried to think back over recent events, to work out what had cued this transformation, his memory played tricks. He had been called to meet with Ballard's superior; that he remembered. Whether he had gone to the meeting, he did not. The night was a blank. Ballard would know how things stood, he reasoned. He had liked and trusted the Englishman from the beginning, sensing that despite the many differences between them they were more alike than not. If he let his instinct lead, he would find Ballard, of that he was certain. No doubt the Englishman would be surprised to see him; even angered at first. But when he told Ballard of this new-found happiness surely his trespasses would be forgiven?

Ballard dined late, and drank until later still in The Ring, a small transvestite bar which he had been first taken to by Odell almost two decades ago. No doubt his guide's intention had been to prove his sophistication by showing his raw colleague the decadence of Berlin, but Ballard, though he never felt any sexual frisson in the company of The Ring's clientele, had immediately felt at home here. His neutrality was respected; no attempts were made to solicit him. He was simply left to drink and watch the passing parade of genders.

Coming here tonight raised the ghost of Odell, whose name would now be scrubbed from conversation because of his involvement with the Mironenko affair. Ballard had seen this process at work before. History did not forgive failure, unless it was so profound as to achieve a kind of grandeur. For the Odells of the world – ambitious men who

had found themselves through little fault of their own in a cul-de-sac from which all retreat was barred – for such men there would be no fine words spoken nor medals struck. There would only be oblivion.

It made him melancholy to think of this, and he drank heavily to keep his thoughts mellow, but when – at two in the morning – he stepped out on to the street his depression was only marginally dulled. The good burghers of Berlin were well a-bed; tomorrow was another working day. Only the sound of traffic from the Kurfurstendamm offered sign of life somewhere near. He made his way towards it, his thoughts fleecy. Behind him, laughter. A young man glamorously dressed as a starlet – tottered along the pavement arm in arm with his unsmiling escort. Ballard recognised the transvestite as a regular at the bar; the client, to judge by his sober suit, was an out-of-towner slaking his thirst for boys dressed as girls behind his wife's back. Ballard picked up his pace. The young man's laughter, its musicality patently forced, set his teeth on edge. He heard somebody running nearby; caught a shadow moving out of the corner of his eye. His watch-dog, most likely. Though alcohol had blurred his instincts, he felt some anxiety surface, the root of which he couldn't fix. He walked on. Feather light tremors ran in his scalp. A few yards on, he realised that the laughter from the street behind him had ceased. He glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting to see the boy and his customer embracing. But both had disappeared; slipped off down one of the alleyways, no doubt, to conclude their contract in darkness. Somewhere near, a dog had begun to bark wildly. Ballard turned round to look back the way he'd come, daring the deserted street to display its secrets to him. Whatever was arousing the buzz in his head and the itch on his palms, it was no commonplace anxiety. There was something wrong with the street, despite its show of innocence; it hid terrors.

The bright lights of the Kurfurstendamm were no more than three minutes' walk away, but he didn't want to turn his back on this mystery and take refuge there. Instead he proceeded to walk back the way he'd come, slowly. The dog had now ceased its alarm, and settled into silence; he had only his footsteps for company. He reached the corner of the first alleyway and peered down it. No light burned at window or doorway. He could sense no living presence in the gloom. He crossed over the alley and walked on to the next. A luxurious stench had crept into the air, which became more lavish yet as he approached the corner. As he breathed it in the buzz in his head deepened to a threat of thunder. A single light flickered in the throat of the alley, a meagre wash from an upper window. By it, he saw the body of the out-of-towner, lying sprawled on the ground. He had been

so traumatically mutilated it seemed an attempt might have been made to turn him inside out. From the spilled innards, that ripe smell rose in all its complexity.

Ballard had seen violent death before, and thought himself indifferent to the spectacle. But something here in the alley threw his calm into disarray. He felt his limbs begin to shake. And then, from beyond the throw of light, the boy spoke.

"In God's name…" he said. His voice had lost all pretension to femininity; it was a murmur of undisguised terror. Ballard took a step down the alley. Neither the boy, nor the reason for his whispered prayer, became visible until he had advanced ten yards. The boy was half-slumped against the wall amongst the refuse. His sequins and taffeta had been ripped from him; the body was pale and sexless. He seemed not to notice Ballard: his eyes were fixed on the deepest shadows.

The shaking in Ballard's limbs worsened as he followed the boy's gaze; it was all he could do to prevent his teeth from chattering. Nevertheless he continued his advance, not for the boy's sake (heroism had little merit, he'd always been taught) but because he was curious, more than curious, eager, to see what manner of man was capable of such casual violence. To look into the eyes of such ferocity seemed at that moment the most important thing in all the world.

Now the boy saw him, and muttered a pitiful appeal, but Ballard scarcely heard it. He felt other eyes upon him, and their touch was like a blow. The din in his head took on a sickening rhythm, like the sound of helicopter rotors. In mere seconds it mounted to a blinding roar. Ballard pressed his hands to his eyes, and stumbled back against the wall, dimly aware that the killer was moving out of hiding (refuse was overturned) and making his escape. He felt something brush against him, and opened his eyes in time to glimpse the man slipping away down the passageway. He seemed somehow misshapen; his back crooked, his head too large. Ballard loosed a shout after him, but the berserker ran on, pausing only to look down at the body before racing towards the street.

Ballard heaved himself off the wall and stood upright. The noise in his head was diminishing somewhat; the attendant giddiness was passing.

Behind him, the boy had begun sobbing. "Did you see?" he said. "Did you see?

"Who was it? Somebody you knew?"

The boy stared at Ballard like a frightened doe, his mascaraed eyes huge.

"Somebody…?" he said.

Ballard was about to repeat the question when there came a shriek of brakes, swiftly followed by the sound of the impact. Leaving the boy to pull his tattered trousseau about him, Ballard went back into the street. Voices were raised nearby; he hurried to their source. A large car was straddling the pavement, its headlights blazing. The driver was being helped from his seat, while his passengers – party-goers to judge by their dress and drink-flushed faces stood and debated furiously as to how the accident had happened. One of the women was talking about an animal in the road, but another of the passengers corrected her. The body that lay in the gutter where it had been thrown was not that of an animal. Ballard had seen little of the killer in the alleyway but he knew instinctively that this was he. There was no sign of the malformation he thought he'd glimpsed, however; just a man dressed in a suit that had seen better days, lying face down in a patch of blood. The police had already arrived, and an officer shouted to him to stand away from the body, but Ballard ignored the instruction and went to steal a look at the dead man's face. There was nothing there of the ferocity he had hoped so much to see. But there was much he recognised nevertheless. The man was Odell.

He told the officers that he had seen nothing of the accident, which was essentially true, and made his escape from the scene before events in the adjacent alley were discovered.

It seemed every corner turned on his route back to his rooms brought a fresh question. Chief amongst them: why he had been lied to about Odell's death? And what psychosis had seized the man that made him capable of the slaughter Ballard had witnessed? He would not get the answers to these questions from his sometime colleagues, that he knew. The only man whom he might have beguiled an answer from was Cripps. He remembered the debate they'd had about Mironenko, and Cripps' talk of reasons for caution when dealing with the Russian. The Glass Eye had known then that there was something in the wind, though surely even he had not envisaged the scale of the present disaster. Two highly valued agents murdered; Mironenko missing, presumed dead; he himself – if Suckling was to be believed – at death's door. And all this begun with Sergei Zakharovich Mironenko, the lost man of Berlin. It seemed his tragedy was

infectious.

Tomorrow, Ballard decided, he would find Suckling and squeeze some answers from him. In the meantime, his head and his hands ached, and he wanted sleep. Fatigue compromised sound judgement, and if ever he needed that faculty it was now. But despite his exhaustion sleep eluded him for an hour or more, and when it came it was no comfort. He dreamt whispers; and hard upon them, rising as if to drown them out, the roar of the helicopters. Twice he surfaced from sleep with his head pounding; twice a hunger to understand what the whispers were telling him drove him to the pillow again. When he woke for the third time, the noise between his temples had become crippling; a thought-cancelling assault which made him fear for his sanity. Barely able to see the room through the pain, he crawled from his bed.

"Please…"he murmured, as if there were somebody to help him from his misery.

A cool voice answered him out of the darkness: "What do you want?"

He didn't question the questioner; merely said: "Take the pain away."

"You can do that for yourself," the voice told him.

He leaned against the wall, nursing his splitting head, tears of agony coming and coming. "I don't know how," he said.

"Your dreams give you pain," the voice replied, “so you must forget them. Do you understand? Forget them, and the pain will go."

He understood the instruction, but not how to realise it. He had no powers of government in sleep. He was the object of these whispers; not they his. But the voice insisted.

"The dream means you harm, Bollard. You must bury it. Bury it deep."

"Bury it?"

"Make an image of it, Ballard. Picture it in detail." He did as he was told. He imagined a burial party, and a box; and in the box, this dream. He made them dig deep, as the voice instructed him, so that he would never be able to disinter this hurtful thing again. But even as he

imagined the box lowered into the pit he heard its boards creak. The dream would not lie down. It beat against confinement. The boards began to break. "Quickly," the voice said. The din of the rotors had risen to a terrifying pitch. Blood had begun to pour from his nostrils; he tasted salt at the back of his throat.

"Finish it!" the voice yelled above the tumult. "Cover it up!"

Ballard looked into the grave. The box was thrashing from side to side.

"Cover it, damn you!"

He tried to make the burial party obey; tried to will them to pick up their shovels and bury the offending thing alive, but they would not. Instead they gazed into the grave as he did and watched as the contents of the box fought for light.

"No!" the voice demanded, its fury mounting. "You must not look!"

The box danced in the hole. The lid splintered.

Briefly, Ballard glimpsed something shining up between the boards.

"It will kill you!" the voice said, and as if to prove its point the volume of the sound rose beyond the point of endurance, washing out burial party, box and all in a blaze of pain. Suddenly it seemed that what the voice said was true; that he was near to death. But it wasn't the dream that was conspiring to kill him, but the sentinel they had posted between him and it: this skull-splintering cacophony.

Only now did he realise that he'd fallen on the floor, prostrate beneath this assault. Reaching out blindly he found the wall, and hauled himself towards it, the machines still thundering behind his eyes, the blood hot on his face. He stood up as best he could and began to move towards the bathroom. Behind him the voice, its tantrum controlled, began its exhortation afresh. It sounded so intimate that he looked round, fully expecting to see the speaker, and he was not disappointed. For a few flickering moments he seemed to be standing in a small, windowless room, its walls painted a uniform white. The light here was bright and dead, and in the centre of the room stood the face behind the voice, smiling.

"Your dreams give you pain," he said. This was the first commandment again. "Bury them Ballard, and the pain will pass."

Ballard wept like a child; this scrutiny shamed him. He looked away from his tutor to bury his tears. "Trust us," another voice said, close by. "We're your friends."

He didn't trust their fine words. The very pain they claimed to want to save him from was of their making; it was a stick to beat him with if the dreams came calling. "We want to help you," one or other of them said. "No…"he murmured. "No damn you… I don't… I don't believe…"

The room flickered out, and he was in the bedroom again, clinging to the wall like a climber to a cliff-face. Before they could come for him with more words, more pain, he edged his way to the bathroom door, and stumbled blindly towards the shower. There was a moment of panic while he located the taps; and then the water came on at a rush. It was bitterly cold, but he put his head beneath it, while the onslaught of rotor-blades tried to shake the plates of his skull apart. Icy water trekked down his back, but he let the rain come down on him in a torrent, and by degrees, the helicopters took their leave. He didn't move, though his body juddered with cold, until the last of them had gone; then he sat on the edge of the bath, mopping water from his neck and face and body, and eventually, when his legs felt courageous enough, made his way back into the bedroom.

He lay down on the same crumpled sheets in much the same position as he'd lain in before; yet nothing was the same. He didn't know what had changed in him, or how. But he lay there without sleep disturbing his serenity through the remaining hours of the night, trying to puzzle it out, and a little before dawn he remembered the words he had muttered in the face of the delusion. Simple words; but oh, their power.

"I don't believe…"he said; and the commandments trembled.

It was half an hour before noon when he arrived at the small book exporting firm which served Suckling for cover. He felt quick-witted, despite the disturbance of the night, and rapidly charmed his way past the receptionist and entered Suckling's office unannounced. When Suckling's eyes settled on his visitor he started from his desk as if fired upon.

"Good morning," said Ballard. "I thought it was time we talked."

Suckling's eyes fled to the office-door, which Ballard had left ajar.

"Sorry; is there a draught?" Ballard closed the door gently. "I want to

see Cripps," he said.

Suckling waded through the sea of books and manuscripts that threatened to engulf his desk. "Are you out of your mind, coming back here?"

Tell them I'm a friend of the family," Ballard offered.

"I can't believe you'd be so stupid."

"Just point me to Cripps, and I'll be away."

Suckling ignored him in favour of his tirade. "It's taken two years to establish my credentials here." Ballard laughed.

"I'm going to report this, damn you!"

"I think you should," said Ballard, turning up the volume. "In the meanwhile: where's Cripps?" Suckling, apparently convinced that he was faced with a lunatic, controlled his apoplexy. "All right," he said. I'll have somebody call on you; take you to him."

"Not good enough," Ballard replied. He crossed to Suckling in two short strides and took hold of him by his lapel. He'd spent at most three hours with Suckling in ten years, but he'd scarcely passed a moment in his presence without itching to do what he was doing now. Knocking the man's hands away, he pushed Suckling against the book-lined wall. A stack of volumes, caught by Suckling's heel, toppled.

"Once more," Ballard said. The old man."

"Take your fucking hands off me," Suckling said, his fury redoubled at being touched.

"Again," said Ballard. "Cripps."

"I'll have you carpeted for this. I'll have you out!"

Ballard leaned towards the reddening face, and smiled.

"I'm out anyway. People have died, remember? London needs a sacrificial lamb, and I think I'm it." Suckling's face dropped. "So I've got nothing to lose, have I?" There was no reply. Ballard pressed closer to Suckling, tightening his grip on the man.'"Have I?"

Suckling's courage failed him. "Cripps is dead," he said.

Ballard didn't release his hold. "You said the same about Odell -" he remarked. At the name, Suckling's eyes widened."- And I saw him only last night," Ballard said, "out on the town."

"You saw Odell?"

"Oh yes."

Mention of the dead man brought the scene in the alleyway back to mind. The smell of the body; the boy's sobs. There were other faiths, thought Ballard, beyond the one he'd once shared with the creature beneath him. Faiths whose devotions were made in heat and blood, whose dogmas were dreams. Where better to baptise himself into that new faith than here, in the blood of the enemy?

Somewhere, at the very back of his head, he could hear the helicopters, but he wouldn't let them take to the air. He was strong today; his head, his hands, all strong. When he drew his nails towards Suckling's eyes the blood came easily. He had a sudden vision of the face beneath the flesh; of Suckling's features stripped to the essence. "Sir?"

Ballard glanced over his shoulder. The receptionist was standing at the open door.

"O h. I'm sorry," she said, preparing to withdraw. To judge by her blushes she assumed this was a lover's tryst she'd walked in upon.

"Stay," said Suckling. "Mr. Ballard… was just leaving."

Ballard released his prey. There would be other opportunities to have Suckling's life.

"I'll see you again," he said.

Suckling drew a handkerchief from his top pocket and pressed it to his face.

"Depend upon it," he replied.

Now they would come for him, he could have no doubt of that. He was a rogue element, and they would strive to silence him as quickly as possible. The thought did not distress him. Whatever they had tried to make him forget with their brain-washing was more ambitious than they had anticipated; however deeply they had taught him to bury it, it was digging its way back to the surface. He couldn't see it yet, but

he knew it was near. More than once on his way back to his rooms he imagined eyes at his back. Maybe he was still being tailed; but his instincts informed him otherwise. The presence he felt close-by – so near that it was sometimes at his shoulder – was perhaps simply another part of him. He felt protected by it, as by a local god.

He had half expected there to be a reception committee awaiting him at his rooms, but there was nobody. Either Suckling had been obliged to delay his alarm-call, or else the upper echelons were still debating their tactics. He pocketed those few keepsakes that he wanted to preserve from their calculating eyes, and left the building again without anyone making a move to stop him.

It felt good to be alive, despite the chill that rendered the grim streets grimmer still. He decided, for no particular reason, to go to the zoo, which, though he had been visiting the city for two decades, he had never done. As he walked it occurred to him that he'd never been as free as he was now; that he had shed mastery like an old coat. No wonder they feared him. They had good reason.

Kantstrasse was busy, but he cut his way through the pedestrians easily, almost as if they sensed a rare certainty in him and gave him a wide berth. As he approached the entrance to the zoo, however, somebody jostled him. He looked round to upbraid the fellow, but caught only the back of the man's head as he was submerged in the crowd heading onto Hardenbergstrasse. Suspecting an attempted theft, he checked his pockets, to find that a scrap of paper had been slipped into one. He knew better than to examine it on the spot, but casually glanced round again to see if he recognised the courier. The man had already slipped away.

He delayed his visit to the zoo and went instead to the Tiergarten, and there – in the wilds of the great park – found a place to read the message. It was from Mironenko, and it requested a meeting to talk of a matter of considerable urgency, naming a house in Marienfelde as a venue. Ballard memorised the details, then shredded the note. It was perfectly possible that the invitation was a trap of course, set either by his own faction or by the opposition. Perhaps a way to test his allegiance; or to manipulate him into a situation in which he could be easily dispatched. Despite such doubts he had no choice but to go however, in the hope that this blind date was indeed with Mironenko. Whatever dangers this rendezvous brought, they were not so new. Indeed, given his long-held doubts of the efficacy of sight, hadn't every date he'd ever made been in some sense blind?

By early evening the damp air was thickening towards a fog, and by the time he stepped off the bus on Hildburghauserstrasse it had a good hold on the city, lending the chill new powers to discomfort.

Ballard went quickly through the quiet streets. He scarcely knew the district at all, but its proximity to the Wall bled it of what little charm it might once have possessed. Many of the houses were unoccupied; of those that were not most were sealed off against the night and the cold and the lights that glared from the watch-towers. It was only with the aid of a map that he located the tiny street Mironenko's note had named. No lights burned in the house. Ballard knocked hard, but there was no answering footstep in the hall. He had anticipated several possible scenarios, but an absence of response at the house had not been amongst them. He knocked again; and again. It was only then that he heard sounds from within, and finally the door was opened to him. The hallway was painted grey and brown, and lit only by a bare bulb. The man silhouetted against this drab interior was not Mironenko.

"Yes?" he said. "What do you want?" His German was spoken with a distinct Muscovite inflection. "I'm looking for a friend of mine," Ballard said.

The man, who was almost as broad as the doorway he stood in, shook his head.

"There's nobody here," he said. "Only me."

"I was told -”

"You must have the wrong house."

No sooner had the doorkeeper made the remark than noise erupted from down the dreary hallway. Furniture was being overturned; somebody had begun to shout. The Russian looked over his shoulder and went to slam the door in Ballard's face, but Ballard's foot was there to stop him. Taking advantage of the man's divided attention, Ballard put his shoulder to the door, and pushed. He was in the hallway – indeed he was half-way down it – before the Russian took a step in pursuit. The sound of demolition had escalated, and was now drowned out by the sound of a man squealing. Ballard followed the sound past the sovereignty of the lone bulb and into gloom at the back of the house. He might well have lost his way at that point but that a door was flung open ahead of him.

The room beyond had scarlet floorboards; they glistened as if

freshly painted. And now the decorator appeared in person. His torso had been ripped open from neck to navel. He pressed his hands to the breached dam, but they were useless to stem the flood; his blood came in spurts, and with it, his innards. He met Ballard's gaze, his eyes full to overflowing with death, but his body had not yet received the instruction to lie down and die; it juddered on in a pitiful attempt to escape the scene of execution behind him.

The spectacle had brought Ballard to a halt, and the Russian from the door now took hold of him, and pulled him back into the hallway, shouting into his face. The outburst, in panicked Russian, was beyond Ballard, but he needed no translation of the hands that encircled his throat. The Russian was half his weight again, and had the grip of an expert strangler, but Ballard felt effortlessly the man's superior. He wrenched the attacker's hands from his neck, and struck him across the face. It was a fortuitous blow. The Russian fell back against the staircase, his shouts silenced.

Ballard looked back towards the scarlet room. The dead man had gone, though scraps of flesh had been left on the threshold.

From within, laughter.

Ballard turned to the Russian.

"What in God's name's going on?" he demanded, but the other man simply stared through the open door. Even as he spoke, the laughter stopped. A shadow moved across the blood-splattered wall of the interior, and a voice said: "Ballard?"

There was a roughness there, as if the speaker had been shouting all day and night, but it was the voice of Mironenko.

"Don't stand out in the cold," he said, “come on in. And bring Solomonov."

The other man made a bid for the front door, but Ballard had hold of him before he could take two steps. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Comrade," said Mironenko. "The dog's gone." Despite the reassurance, Solomonov began to sob as Ballard pressed him towards the open door.

Mironenko was right; it was warmer inside. And there no sign of a dog. There was blood in abundance, however. The man Ballard had last seen teetering in the doorway had been dragged back into this abattoir while he and Solomonov had struggled. The body had been

treated with astonishing barbarity. The head had been smashed open; the innards were a grim litter underfoot. Squatting in the shadowy corner of this terrible room, Mironenko. He had been mercilessly beaten to judge by the swelling about his head and upper torso, but his unshaven face bore a smile for his saviour.

"I knew you'd come," he said. His gaze fell upon Solomonov. They followed me," he said. "They meant to kill me, I suppose. Is that what you intended, Comrade?"

Solomonov shook with fear – his eyes flitting from the bruised moon of Mironenko's face to the pieces of gut that lay everywhere about – finding nowhere a place of refuge.

"What stopped them?" Ballard asked.

Mironenko stood up. Even this slow movement caused Solomonov to flinch.

"Tell Mr. Ballard," Mironenko prompted. "Tell him what happened." Solomonov was too terrified to speak. "He's KGB, of course," Mironenko explained. "Both trusted men. But not trusted enough to be warned, poor idiots. So they were sent to murder me with just a gun and a prayer." He laughed at the thought. "Neither of which were much use in the circumstances."

"I beg you…" Solomonov murmured,"… let me go. I'll say nothing."

"You'll say what they want you to say, Comrade, the way we all must," Mironenko replied. "Isn't that right, Ballard? All slaves of our faith?"

Ballard watched Mironenko's face closely; there was a fullness there that could not be entirely explained by the bruising. The skin almost seemed to crawl.

"They have made us forgetful," Mironenko said.

"Of what?" Ballard enquired.

"Of ourselves," came the reply, and with it Mironenko moved from his murky corner and into the light. What had Solomonov and his dead companion done to him? His flesh was a mass of tiny contusions, and there were bloodied lumps at his neck and temples which Ballard might have taken for bruises but that they palpitated, as if something nested beneath the skin. Mironenko made no sign of discomfort

however, as he reached out to Solomonov. At his touch the failed assassin lost control of his bladder, but Mironenko's intentions were not murderous. With eerie tenderness he stroked a tear from Solomonov's cheek. "Go back to them," he advised the trembling man. "Tell them what you've seen."

Solomonov seemed scarcely to believe his ears, or else suspected – as did Ballard – that this forgiveness was a sham, and that any attempt to leave would invite fatal consequences.

But Mironenko pressed his point. "Go on," he said. "Leave us please. Or would you prefer to stay and eat?" Solomonov took a single, faltering step towards the door. When no blow came he took a second step, and a third, and now he was out of the door and away.

"Tell them!" Mironenko shouted after him. The front door slammed.

"Tell them what?" said Ballard.

"That I've remembered," Mironenko said. "That I've found the skin they stole from me."

For the first time since entering this house, Ballard began to feel queasy. It was not the blood nor the bones underfoot, but a look in Mironenko's eyes. He'd seen eyes as bright once before. But where?

"You -" he said quietly, "you did this."

"Certainly," Mironenko replied.

"How?" Ballard said. There was a familiar thunder climbing from the back of his head. He tried to ignore it, and press some explanation from the Russian. "How, damn you?"

"We are the same," Mironenko replied. "I smell it in you."

"No," said Ballard. The clamour was rising.

"The doctrines are just words. It's not what we're taught but what we know that matters. In our marrow; in our souls."

He had talked of souls once before; of places his masters had built in which a man could be broken apart. At the time Ballard had thought such talk mere extravagance; now he wasn't so sure. What was the burial party all about, if not the subjugation of some secret part of him? The marrow-part; the soul-part.

Before Ballard could find the words to express himself, Mironenko froze, his eyes gleaming more brightly than ever. "They're outside," he said.

"Who are?"

The Russian shrugged. "Does it matter?" he said. "Your side or mine. Either one will silence us if they can." That much was true.

"We must be quick," he said, and headed for the hallway. The front door stood ajar. Mironenko was there in moments. Ballard followed. Together they slipped out on to the street.

The fog had thickened. It idled around the street- lamps, muddying their light, making every doorway a hiding place. Ballard didn't wait to tempt the pursuers out into the open, but followed Mironenko, who was already well ahead, swift despite his bulk. Ballard had to pick up his pace to keep the man in sight. One moment he was visible, the next the fog closed around him. The residential property they moved through now gave way to more anonymous buildings, warehouses perhaps, whose walls stretched up into the murky darkness unbroken by windows. Ballard called after him to slow his crippling pace. The Russian halted and turned back to Ballard, his outline wavering in the besieged light. Was it a trick of the fog, or had Mironenko's condition deteriorated in the minutes since they'd left the house? His face seemed to be seeping; the lumps on his neck had swelled further.

"We don't have to run," Ballard said. "They're not following."

"They're always following," Mironenko replied, and as if to give weight to the observation Ballard heard fog deadened footsteps in a nearby street. "No time to debate," Mironenko murmured, and turning on his heel, he ran. In seconds, the fog had spirited him away again.

Ballard hesitated another moment. Incautious as it was, he wanted to catch a glimpse of his pursuers so as to know them for the future. But now, as the soft pad of Mironenko's step diminished into silence, he realised that the other footsteps had also ceased. Did they know he was waiting for them? He held his breath, but there was neither sound nor sign of them. The delinquent fog idled on. He seemed to be alone in it. Reluctantly, he gave up waiting and went after the Russian at a run. A few yards on the road divided. There was no sign of Mironenko in either direction. Cursing his stupidity in lingering behind, Ballard followed the route which was most heavily shrouded in fog. The street was short, and ended at a wall lined with spikes, beyond which there

was a park of some kind. The fog clung more tenaciously to this space of damp earth than it did to the street, and Ballard could see no more than four or five yards across the grass from where he stood. But he knew intuitively that he had chosen the right road; that Mironenko had scaled this wall and was waiting for him somewhere close by. Behind him, the fog kept its counsel. Either their pursuers had lost him, or their way, or both. He hoisted himself up on to the wall, avoiding the spikes by a whisper, and dropped down on the opposite side. The street had seemed pin-drop quiet, but it clearly wasn't, for it was quieter still inside the park. The fog was chillier here, and pressed more insistently upon him as he advanced across the wet grass. The wall behind him – his only point of anchorage in this wasteland – became a ghost of itself, then faded entirely. Committed now, he walked on a few more steps, not certain that he was even taking a straight route. Suddenly the fog curtain was drawn aside and he saw a figure waiting for him a few yards ahead. The bruises now twisted his face so badly Ballard would not have known it to be Mironenko, but that his eyes still burned so brightly. The man did not wait for Ballard, but turned again and loped off into insolidity, leaving the Englishman to follow, cursing both the chase and the quarry. As he did so, he felt a movement close by. His senses were useless in the clammy embrace of fog and night, but he saw with that other eye, heard with that other ear, and he knew he was not alone. Had Mironenko given up the race and come back to escort him? He spoke the man's name, knowing that in doing so he made his position apparent to any and all, but equally certain that whoever stalked him already knew precisely where he stood.

"Speak," he said.

There was no reply out of the fog.

Then; movement. The fog curled upon itself and Ballard glimpsed a form dividing the veils. Mironenko! He called after the man again, taking several steps through the murk in pursuit and suddenly something was stepping out to meet him. He saw the phantom for a moment only; long enough to glimpse incandescent eyes and teeth grown so vast they wrenched the mouth into a permanent grimace. Of those facts – eyes and teeth – he was certain. Of the other bizarrities – the bristling flesh, the monstrous limbs – he was less sure. Maybe his mind, exhausted with so much noise and pain, was finally losing its grip on the real world; inventing terrors to frighten him back into ignorance. "Damn you," he said, defying both the thunder that was coming to blind him again and the phantoms he would be blinded to. Almost as if to test his defiance, the fog up ahead shimmered and

parted and something that he might have taken for human, but that it had its belly to the ground, slunk into view and out. To his right, he heard growls; to his left, another indeterminate form came and went. He was surrounded, it seemed, by mad men and wild dogs. And Mironenko; where was he? Part of this assembly, or prey to it? Hearing a half-word spoken behind him, he swung round to see a figure that was plausibly that of the Russian backing into the fog. This time he didn't walk in pursuit, he ran, and his speed was rewarded. The figure reappeared ahead of him, and Ballard stretched to snatch at the man's jacket. His fingers found purchase, and all at once Mironenko was reeling round, a growl in his throat, and Ballard was staring into a face that almost made him cry out. His mouth was a raw wound, the teeth vast, the eyes slits of molten gold; the lumps at his neck had swelled and spread, so that the Russian's head was no longer raised above his body but part of one undivided energy, head becoming torso without an axis intervening. "Ballard," the beast smiled.

Its voice clung to coherence only with the greatest difficulty, but Ballard heard the remnants of Mironenko there. The more he scanned the simmering flesh, the more appalled he became.

"Don't be afraid," Mironenko said.

"What disease is this?"

"The only disease I ever suffered was forgetfulness, and I'm cured of that -" He grimaced as he spoke, as if each word was shaped in contradiction to the instincts of his throat.

Ballard touched his hand to his head. Despite his revolt against the pain, the noise was rising and rising."… You remember too, don't you? You're the same."

"No," Ballard muttered.

Mironenko reached a spine-haired palm to touch him.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "You're not alone. There are many of us. Brothers and sisters."

"I'm not your brother," Ballard said. The noise was bad, but the face of Mironenko was worse. Revolted, he turned his back on it, but the Russian only followed him.

"Don't you taste freedom, Ballard? And life. Just a breath away."

Ballard walked on, the blood beginning to creep from his nostrils. He let it come. "It only hurts for a while," Mironenko said. "Then the pain goes…" Ballard kept his head down, eyes to the earth.

Mironenko, seeing that he was making little impression, dropped behind.

They won't take you back!" he said. "You've seen too much."

The roar of helicopters did not entirely blot these words out. Ballard knew there was truth in them. His step faltered, and through the cacophony he heard Mironenko murmur: "Look…"

Ahead, the fog had thinned somewhat, and the park wall was visible through rags of mist. Behind him, Mironenko's voice had descended to a snarl.

"Look at what you are."

The rotors roared; Ballard's legs felt as though they would fold up beneath him. But he kept up his advance towards the wall. Within yards of it, Mironenko called after him again, but this time the words had fled altogether. There was only a low growl. Ballard could not resist looking; just once. He glanced over his shoulder.

Again the fog confounded him, but not entirely. For moments that were both an age and yet too brief, Ballard saw the thing that had been Mironenko in all its glory, and at the sight the rotors grew to screaming pitch. He clamped his hands to his face. As he did so a shot rang out; then another; then a volley of shots. He fell to the ground, as much in weakness as in self-defence, and uncovered his eyes to see several human figures moving in the fog. Though he had forgotten their pursuers, they had not forgotten him. They had traced him to the park, and stepped into the midst of this lunacy, and now men and half-men and things not men were lost in the fog, and there was bloody confusion on every side. He saw a gunman firing at a shadow, only to have an ally appear from the fog with a bullet in his belly; saw a thing appear on four legs and flit from sight again on two; saw another run by carrying a human head by the hair, and laughing from its snouted face.

The turmoil spilled towards him. Fearing for his life, he stood up and staggered back towards the wall. The cries and shots and snarls went on; he expected either bullet or beast to find him with every step. But he reached the wall alive, and attempted to scale it. His co-ordination had deserted him, however. He had no choice but to follow

the wall along its length until he reached the gate.

Behind him the scenes of unmasking and transformation and mistaken identity went on. His enfeebled thoughts turned briefly to Mironenko. Would he, or any of his tribe, survive this massacre?

"Ballard," said a voice in the fog. He couldn't see the speaker, although he recognised the voice. He'd heard it in his delusion, and it had told him lies.

He felt a pin-prick at his neck. The man had come from behind, and was pressing a needle into him. "Sleep," the voice said. And with the words came oblivion.

At first he couldn't remember the man's name. His mind wandered like a lost child, although his interrogator would time and again demand his attention, speaking to him as though they were old friends. And there was indeed something familiar about his errant eye, that went on its way so much more slowly than its companion. At last, the name came to him.

"You're Cripps," he said.

"Of course I'm Cripps," the man replied. "Is your memory playing tricks? Don't concern yourself. I've given you some suppressants, to keep you from losing your balance. Not that I think that's very likely. You've fought the good fight, Ballard, in spite of considerable provocation. When I think of the way Odell snapped…" He sighed. "Do you remember last night at all?"

At first his mind's eye was blind. But then the memories began to come. Vague forms moving in a fog. "The park," he said at last.

"I only just got you out. God knows how many are dead."

"The other… the Russian…?"

"Mironenko?" Cripps prompted. "I don't know. I'm not in charge any longer, you see; I just stepped in to salvage something if I could. London will need us again, sooner or later. Especially now they know the Russians have a special corps like us. We'd heard rumours of course; and then, after you'd met with him, began to wonder about Mironenko. That's why I set up the meeting. And of course when I saw him, face to face, I knew. There's something in the eyes. Something hungry."

"I saw him change -"

"Yes, it's quite a sight, isn't it? The power it unleashes. That's why we developed the programme, you see, to harness that power, to have it work for us. But it's difficult to control. It took years of suppression therapy, slowly burying the desire for transformation, so that what we had left was a man with a beast's faculties. A wolf in sheep's clothing. We thought we had the problem beaten; that if the belief systems didn't keep you subdued the pain response would. But we were wrong." He stood up and crossed to the window. "Now we have to start again."

"Suckling said you'd been wounded."

"No. Merely demoted. Ordered back to London."

"But you're not going."

"I will now; now that I've found you." He looked round at Ballard. "You're my vindication, Ballard. You're living proof that my techniques are viable. You have full knowledge of your condition, yet the therapy holds the leash." He turned back to the window. Rain lashed the glass. Ballard could almost feel it upon his head, upon his back. Cool, sweet rain. For a blissful moment he seemed to be running in it, close to the ground, and the air was full of the scents the downpour had released from the pavements.

"Mironenko said -"

"Forget Mironenko," Cripps told him. "He's dead. You're the last of the old order, Ballard. And the first of the new." Downstairs, a bell rang. Cripps peered out of the window at the streets below.

"Well, well," he said. "A delegation, come to beg us to return. I hope you're flattered." He went to the door. "Stay here. We needn't show you off tonight. You're weary. Let them wait, eh? Let them sweat." He left the stale room, closing the door behind him. Ballard heard his footsteps on the stairs. The bell was being rung a second time. He got up and crossed to the window. The weariness of the late afternoon light matched his weariness; he and his city were still of one accord, despite the curse that was upon him. Below a man emerged from the back of the car and crossed to the front door. Even at this acute angle Ballard recognised Suckling.

There were voices in the hallway; and with Suckling's appearance the debate seemed to become more heated. Ballard went to the door,

and listened, but his drug-dulled mind could make little sense of the argument. He prayed that Cripps would keep to his word, and not allow them to peer at him. He didn't want to be a beast like Mironenko. It wasn't freedom, was it, to be so terrible? It was merely a different kind of tyranny. But then he didn't want to be the first of Cripps' heroic new order either. He belonged to nobody, he realised; not even himself. He was hopelessly lost. And yet hadn't Mironenko said at that first meeting that the man who did not believe himself lost, was lost? Perhaps better that – better to exist in the twilight between one state and another, to prosper as best he could by doubt and ambiguity – than to suffer the certainties of the tower. The debate below was gaining in momentum. Ballard opened the door so as to hear better. It was Suckling's voice that met him. The tone was waspish, but no less threatening for that.

"It's over…" he was telling Cripps '… don't you understand plain English?" Cripps made an attempt to protest, but Suckling cut him short. "Either you come in a gentlemanly fashion or Gideon and Sheppard carry you out. Which is it to be?"

"What is this?" Cripps demanded. "You're nobody, Suckling. You're comic relief."

"That was yesterday," the man replied. "There've been some changes made. Every dog has his day, isn't that right? You should know that better than anybody. I'd get a coat if I were you. It's raining."

There was a short silence, then Cripps said: "All right. I'll come."

"Good man," said Suckling sweetly. "Gideon, go check upstairs."

"I'm alone," said Cripps.

"I believe you," said Suckling. Then to Gideon, "Do it anyway."

Ballard heard somebody move across the hallway, and then a sudden flurry of movement. Cripps was either making an escape-bid or attacking Suckling, one of the two. Suckling shouted out; there was a scuffle. Then, cutting through the confusion, a single shot.

Cripps cried out, then came the sound of him falling.

Now Suckling's voice, thick with fury. "Stupid," he said. "Stupid."

Cripps groaned something which Ballard didn't catch.

Had he asked to be dispatched, perhaps, for Suckling told him: "No. You're going back to London. Sheppard, stop him bleeding. Gideon; upstairs." Baliard backed away from the head of the stairs as Gideon began his ascent. He felt sluggish and inept. There was no way out of this trap. They would corner him and exterminate him. He was a beast; a mad dog in a maze. If he'd only killed Suckling when he'd had the strength to do so. But then what good would that have done? The world was full of men like Suckling, men biding their time until they could show their true colours; vile, soft, secret men. And suddenly the beast seemed to move in Baliard, and he thought of the park and the fog and the smile on the face of Mironenko, and he felt a surge of grief for something he'd never had: the life of a monster.

Gideon was almost at the top of the stairs. Though it could only delay the inevitable by moments, Baliard slipped along the landing and opened the first door he found. It was the bathroom. There was a bolt on the door, which he slipped into place.

The sound of running water filled the room. A piece of guttering had broken, and was delivering a torrent of rainwater onto the window-sill. The sound, and the chill of the bathroom, brought the night of delusions back. He remembered the pain and blood; remembered the shower – water beating on his skull, cleansing him of the taming pain. At the thought, four words came to his lips unbidden.

"I do not believe."

He had been heard.

"There's somebody up here," Gideon called. The man approached the door, and beat on it. "O pen up!" Baliard heard him quite clearly, but didn't reply. His throat was burning, and the roar of rotors was growing louder again. He put his back to the door and despaired.

Suckling was up the stairs and at the doo r in seconds. "Who's in there?" he demanded to know. "Answer me! Who's in there?" Getting no response, he ordered that Cripps be brought upstairs. There was more commotion as the order was obeyed.

"For the last time -" Suckling said.

The pressure was building in Ballard's skull. This time it seemed the din had lethal intentions; his eyes ached, as if about to be blown from their sockets. He caught sight of something in the mirror above the sink; something with gleaming eyes, and again, the words came – "I do not believe"- but this time his throat, hot with other business, could

barely pronounce them. "Ballard," said Suckling. There was triumph in the word. "My God, we've got Ballard as well. This is our lucky day."

No, thought the man in the mirror. There was nobody of that name here. Nobody of any name at all, in fact, for weren't names the first act of faith, the first board in the box you buried freedom in? The thing he was becoming would not be named; nor boxed; nor buried. Never again.

For a moment he lost sight of the bathroom, and found himself hovering above the grave they had made him dig, and in the depths the box danced as its contents fought its premature burial. He could hear the wood splintering – or was it the sound of the door being broken down?

The box-lid flew off. A rain of nails fell on the heads of the burial party. The noise in his head, as if knowing that its torments had proved fruitless, suddenly fled, and with it the delusion. He was back in the bathroom, facing the open door. The men who stared through at him had the faces of fools. Slack, and stupefied with shock – seeing the way he was wrought. Seeing the snout of him, the hair of him, the golden eye and the yellow tooth of him. Their horror elated him.

"Kill it!" said Suckling, and pushed Gideon into the breach. The man already had his gun from his pocket and was leveling it, but his trigger-finger was too slow. The beast snatched his hand and pulped the flesh around the steel. Gideon screamed, and stumbled away down the stairs, ignoring Suckling's shouts.

As the beast raised his hand to sniff the blood on his palm there was a flash of fire, and he felt the blow to his shoulder. Sheppard had no chance to fire a second shot however before his prey was through the door and upon him. Forsaking his gun, he made a futile bid for the stairs, but the beast's hand unsealed the back of his head in one easy stroke. The gunman toppled forward, the narrow landing filling with the smell of him. Forgetting his other enemies, the beast fell upon the offal and ate.

Somebody said: "Ballard."

The beast swallowed down the dead man's eyes in one gulp, like prime oysters.

Again, those syllables."'Ballard." He would have gone on with his meal, but that the sound of weeping pricked his ears. Dead to himself he was, but not to grief. He dropped the meat from his fingers and

looked back along the landing.

The man who was crying only wept from one eye; the other gazed on, oddly untouched. But the pain in the living eye was profound indeed. It was despair, the beast knew; such suffering was too close to him for the sweetness of transformation to have erased it entirely. The weeping man was locked in the arms of another man, who had his gun placed against the side of his prisoner's head.

"If you make another move," the captor said, "I'll blow his head off. Do you understand me?"

The beast wiped his mouth.

"Tell him, Cripps! He's your baby. Make him understand."

The one-eyed man tried to speak, but words defeated him. Blood from the wound in his abdomen seeped between his fingers.

"Neither of you need die," the captor said. The beast didn't like the music of his voice; it was shrill and deceitful. "London would much prefer to have you alive. So why don't you tell him, Cripps? Tell him I mean him no harm." The weeping man nodded.

"Ballard…"he murmured. His voice was softer than the other. The beast listened.

"Tell me, Ballard -" he said,"- how does it feel?"

The beast couldn't quite make sense of the question.

"Please tell me. For curiosity's sake -"

"Damn you -" said Suckling, pressing the gun into Cripps' flesh. "This isn't a debating society." "Is it good?" Cripps asked, ignoring both man and gun.

"Shut up!"

"Answer me, Ballard. How does it feel?

As he stared into Cripps' despairing eyes the meaning of the sounds he'd uttered came clear, the words falling into place like the pieces of a mosaic. "Is it good?" the man was asking.

Ballard heard laughter in his throat, and found the syllables there to reply.

"Yes," he told the weeping man. "Yes. It's good."

He had not finished his reply before Cripps' hand sped to snatch at Suckling's. Whether he intended suicide or escape nobody would ever know. The trigger-finger twitched, and a bullet flew up through Cripps' head and spread his despair across the ceiling. Suckling threw the body off, and went to level the gun, but the beast was already upon him.

Had he been more of a man, Ballard might have thought to make Suckling suffer, but he had no such perverse ambition. His only thought was to render the enemy extinct as efficiently as possible. Two sharp and lethal blows did it. Once the man was dispatched, Ballard crossed over to where Cripps was lying. His glass eye had escaped destruction. It gazed on fixedly, untouched by the holocaust all around them. Unseating it from the maimed head, Ballard put in his pocket; then he went out into the rain.

It was dusk. He did not know which district of Berlin he'd been brought to, but his impulses, freed of reason, led him via the back streets and shadows to a wasteland on the outskirts of the city, in the middle of which stood a solitary ruin. It was anybody's guess as to what the building might once have been (an abattoir? an opera-house?) but by some freak of fate it had escaped demolition, though every other building had been leveled for several hundred yards in each direction. As he made his way across the weed-clogged rubble the wind changed direction by a few degrees and carried the scent of his tribe to him. There were many there, together in the shelter of the ruin. Some leaned their backs against the wall and shared a cigarette; some were perfect wolves, and haunted the darkness like ghosts with golden eyes; yet others might have passed for human entirely, but for their trails.

Though he feared that names would be forbidden amongst this clan, he asked two lovers who were rutting in the shelter of the wall if they knew of a man called Mironenko. The bitch had a smooth and hairless back, and a dozen full teats hanging from her belly.

"Listen," she said.

Ballard listened, and heard somebody talking in a corner of the ruin. The voice ebbed and flowed. He followed the sound across the roofless interior to where a wolf was standing, surrounded by an attentive audience, an open book in its front paws. At Ballard's approach one or two of the audience turned their luminous eyes up to him. The reader

halted.

"Ssh!" said one, “the Comrade is reading to us."

It was Mironenko who spoke. Ballard slipped into the ring of listeners beside him, as the reader took up the story afresh.

"And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth…" Ballard had heard the words before, but tonight they were new.

"… and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air…" He looked around the circle of listeners as the words described their familiar pattern.

"… and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.'"

Somewhere near, a beast was crying.

XXX: THE BOOK OF BLOOD (A POSTSCRIPT): ON JERUSALEM STREET

Wyburd looked at the book, and the book looked back. Everything he'd ever been told about the boy was true.

"How did you get in?" McNeal wanted to know. There was neither anger nor trepidation in his voice; only casual curiosity.

"Over the wall," Wyburd told him.

The book nodded. "Come to see if the rumours were true?"

"Something like that."

Amongst connoisseurs of the bizarre, McNeal's story was told in reverential whispers. How the boy had passed himself off as a medium, inventing stories on behalf of the departed for his own profit; and how the dead had finally tired of his mockery, and broken into the living world to exact an immaculate revenge. They had written upon him; tattooed their true testaments upon his skin so that he would never again take their grief in vain. They had turned his body into a living book, a book of blood, every inch of which was minutely engraved with their histories. Wyburd was not a credulous man. He had never quite believed the story – until now. But here was living proof of its veracity, standing before him. There was no part of McNeal's exposed skin which was not itching with tiny words. Though it was four years and more since the ghosts had come for him, the flesh still looked tender, as though the wounds would never entirely heal.

"Have you seen enough?" the boy asked. "There's more. He's covered from head to foot. Sometimes he wonders if they didn't write on the inside as well." He sighed. "Do you want a drink?"

Wyburd nodded. Maybe a throatful of spirits would stop his hands from trembling.

McNeal poured himself a glass of vodka, took a slug from it, then poured a second glass for his guest. As he did so, Wyburd saw that the boy's nape was as densely inscribed as his face and hands, the writing

creeping up into his hair. Not even his scalp had escaped the authors' attentions, it seemed.

"Why do you talk about yourself in the third person?" he asked McNeal, as the boy returned with the glass. "Like you weren't here…?"

The boy?" McNeal said. "He isn't here. He hasn't been here in a long time."

He sat down; drank. Wyburd began to feel more than a little uneasy. Was the boy simply mad, or playing some damn-fool game?

The boy swallowed another mouthful of vodka, then asked, matter of factly: "What's it worth to you?" Wyburd frowned. "What's what worth?"

"His skin," the boy prompted. "That's what you came for, isn't it?"

Wyburd emptied his glass with two swallows, making no reply. McNeal shrugged.

"Everyone has the right to silence," he said. "Except for the boy of course. No silence for him." He looked down at his hand, turning it over to appraise the writing on his palm. "The stories go on, night and day. Never stop. They tell themselves, you see. They bleed and bleed. You can never hush them; never heal them."

He is mad, Wyburd thought, and somehow the realisation made what he was about to do easier. Better to kill a sick animal than a healthy one.

"There's a road, you know…" the boy was saying. He wasn't even looking at his executioner. "A road the dead go down. He saw it. Dark, strange road, full of people. Not a day gone by when he hasn't… hasn't wanted to go back there."

"Back?" said Wyburd, happy to keep the boy talking. His hand went to his jacket pocket; to the knife. It comforted him in the presence of this lunacy.

"Nothing's enough," McNeal said. "Not love. Not music. Nothing."

Clasping the knife, Wyburd drew it from his pocket.

The boy's eyes found the blade, and warmed to the sight.

"You never told him how much it was worth," he said.

"Two hundred thousand," Wyburd replied.

"Anyone he knows?"

The assassin shook his head. "An exile," he replied. "In Rio. A collector."

"Of skins?"

"Of skins."

The boy put down his glass. He murmured something Wyburd didn't catch. Then, very quietly, he said: "Be quick, and do it."

He juddered a little as the knife found his heart, but Wyburd was efficient. The moment had come and gone before the boy even knew it was happening, much less felt it. Then it was all over, for him at least. For Wyburd the real labour was only just beginning. It took him two hours to complete the flaying. When he was finished – the skin folded in fresh linen, and locked in the suitcase he'd brought for that very purpose – he was weary. Tomorrow he would fly to Rio, he thought as he left the house, and claim the rest of his payment. Then, Florida. He spent the evening in the small apartment he'd rented for the tedious weeks of surveillance and planning which had preceded this afternoon's work. He was glad to be leaving. He had been lonely here, and anxious with anticipation. Now the job was done, and he could put the time behind him.

He slept well, lulled to sleep by the imagined scent of orange groves.

It was not fruit he smelt when he woke, however, but something savoury. The room was in darkness. He reached to his right, and fumbled for the lamp-switch, but it failed to come on.

Now he heard a heavy slopping sound from across the room. He sat up in bed, narrowing his eyes against the dark, but could see nothing. Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, he went to stand up.

His first thought was that he'd left the bathroom taps on, and had flooded the apartment. He was knee-deep in warm water. Confounded, he waded towards the door and reached for the main light-switch, flipping it on. It was not water he was standing in. Too cloying, too precious; too red.

He made a cry of disgust, and turned to haul open the door, but it

was locked, and there was no key. He beat a panicked fusillade upon the solid wood, and yelled for help. His appeals went unanswered.

Now he turned back into the room, the hot tide eddying about his thighs, and sought out the fountain- head. The suitcase. It sat where he had left it on the bureau, and bled copiously from every seam; and from the locks; and from around the hinges – as if a hundred atrocities were being committed within its confines, and it could not contain the flood these acts had unleashed.

He watched the blood pouring out in steaming abundance. In the scant seconds since he'd stepped from the bed the pool had deepened by several inches, and still the deluge came.

He tried the bathroom door, but that too was locked and keyless. He tried the windows, but the shutters were immovable. The blood had reached his waist. Much of the furniture was floating. Knowing he was lost unless he attempted some direct action, he pressed through the flood towards the case, and put his hands upon the lid in the hope that he might yet stem the flow. It was a lost cause. At his touch the blood seemed to come with fresh eagerness, threatening to burst the seams.

The stories go on, the boy had said. They bleed and bleed. And now he seemed to hear them in his head, those stories. Dozens of voices, each telling some tragic tale. The flood bore him up towards the ceiling. He paddled to keep his chin above the frothy tide, but in minutes there was barely an inch of air left at the top of the room. As even that margin narrowed, he added his own voice to the cacophony, begging for the nightmare to stop. But the other voices drowned him out with their stories, and as he kissed the ceiling his breath ran out.

The dead have highways. They run, unerring lines of ghost-trains, of dream-carriages, across the wasteland behind our lives, bearing an endless traffic of departed souls. They have sign-posts, these highways, and bridges and laybys. They have turnpikes and intersections.

It was at one of these intersections that Leon Wyburd caught sight of the man in the red suit. The throng pressed him forward, and it was only when he came closer that he realised his error. The man was not wearing a suit. He was not even wearing his skin. It was not the McNeal boy however; he had gone on from this point long since. It was another flayed man entirely. Leon fell in beside the man as he walked, as they talked together. The flayed man told him how he had

come to this condition; of his brother-in-law's conspiracies, and the ingratitude of his daughter. Leon in turn told of his last moments.

It was a great relief to tell the story. Not because he wanted to be remembered, but because the telling relieved him of the tale. It no longer belonged to him, that life, that death. He had better business, as did they all. Roads to travel; splendours to drink down. He felt the landscape widen. Felt the air brightening.

What the boy had said was true. The dead have highways.

Only the living are lost.

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